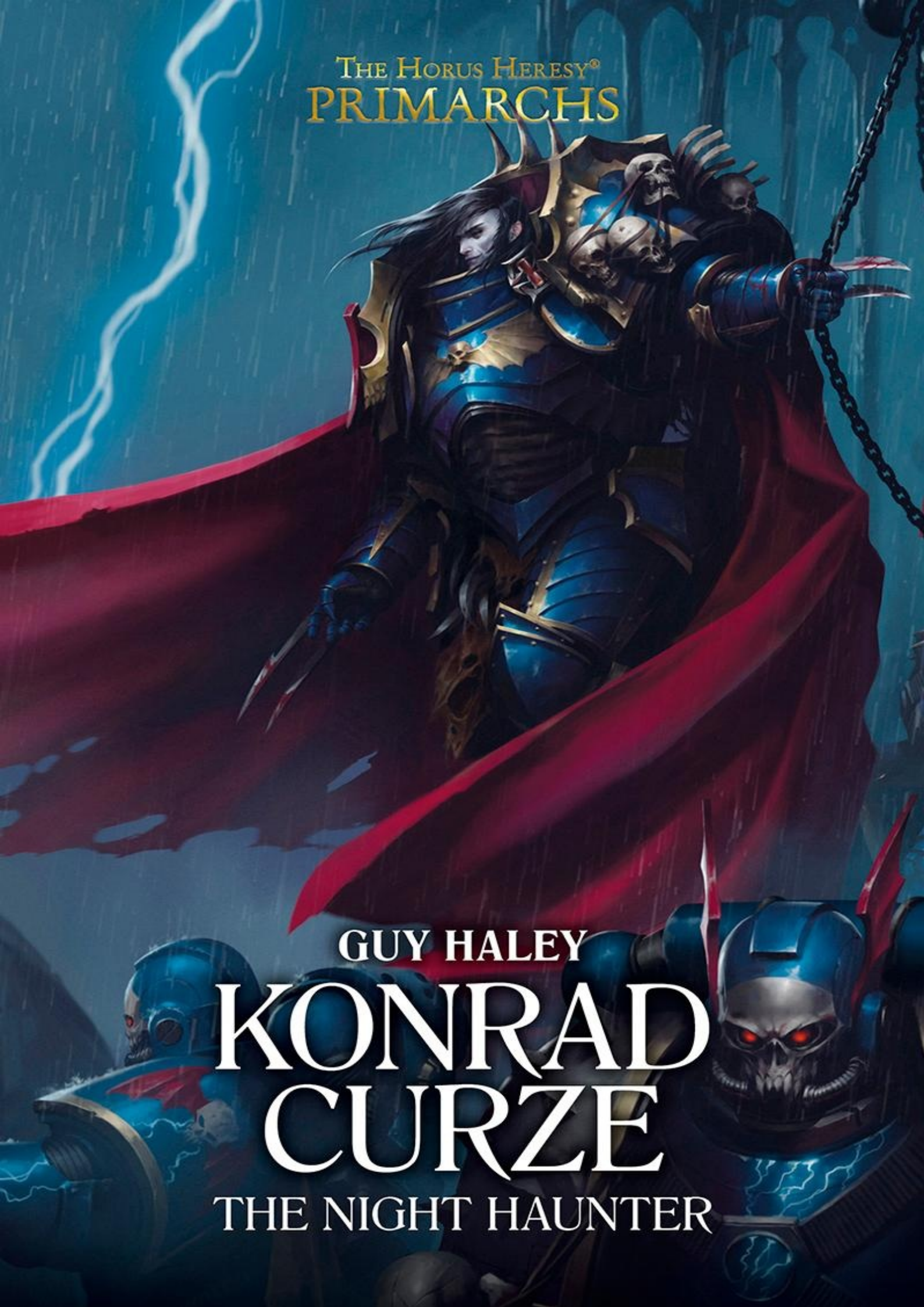
THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
GUY HALEY
KONRAD CURZE
THE NIGHT HAUNTER

BACKLIST

The Primarchs

ANGRON: SLAVE OF NUCERIA
CORAX: LORD OF SHADOWS
JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS
VULKAN: LORD OF DRAKES
FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA
FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX
LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD
PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA
MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO
LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF
ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR

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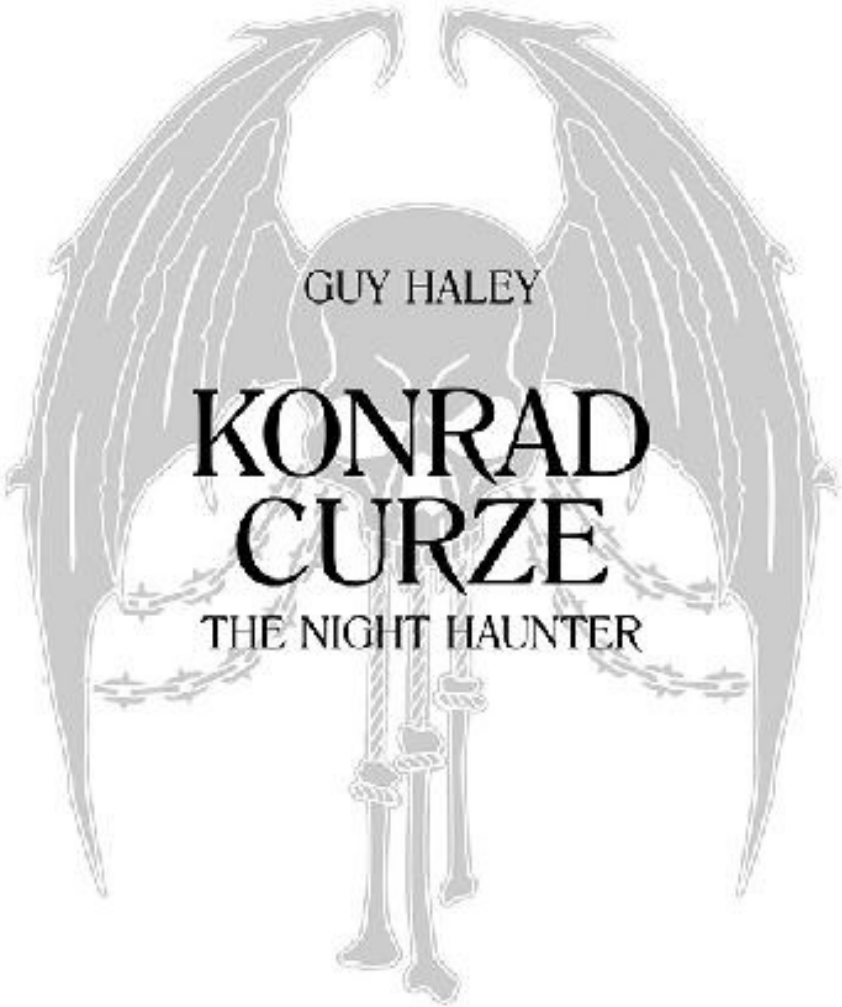

GUY HALEY

KONRAD CURZE

THE NIGHT HAUNTER

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

‘Your presence does not surprise me, Assassin. I have known of you ever since your craft entered the Eastern Fringes. Why did I not have you killed? Because your mission and the act you are about to commit proves the truth of all I have ever said or done. I merely punished those who had wronged, just as your false Emperor now seeks to punish me. Death is nothing compared to vindication.’

– The last words of Konrad Curze,
primarch of the VIII Legion Astartes.

ONE

THE DARK

Corpse-grey Tsagualsa turned under the light of a sickly star. A desert world in desert space, bereft of human settlement, and so far from the illumination of the Astronomican that it would likely stay that way forever. Of no consequential size, lacking moisture beyond the merest trace, Tsagualsa had nothing to recommend itself. And yet there were those that called it home.

The Night Lords had claimed the world for themselves.

Tsagualsa suited the VIII Legion's temperament. A bitter place, born from gas and fire as all planets are, and with the potential that entails, but faltering in the final stages of development, never reaching the exultant flourish of life that worlds round kinder suns attain. Like its new masters, as the offspring of deficient parents themselves, the planet was doomed to stunted expressions of potential.

The Night Lords had another name for the planet, bestowed with a Nostraman flair for poetry, and that was the Carrion World. Nostramans were habitual liars, and poetry is the liar's art; Tsagualsa was so dry and dusty there was nothing alive to die to become carrion, and nothing to feed on it if it did. This lifeless state pleased their lord primarch, as an embodiment of the order he craved. Order flourished there for eternities. Nothing changed. Every mark on the planet's surface was eventually wiped clean by abiotic winds and falls of shrouding dust. Dunes of grey sand built up and were worn down.

Until the Night Lords came.

Curze was a cancer, a creature of anarchy. The Carrion World remained changeless only while it was uninhabited. To Tsagualsa the Night Lords brought the sordid chaos of Nostramo.

The fortress the VIII Legion built for their lord was the sole outpost of life. A vast castle of black rock, decorated with the mortal remains of their victims, in aspect it was entirely grim, though its more sickening displays of the torturer's trade were artful in their macabre way. Tens of thousands of warriors required hundreds of thousands of slaves, who forged brute societies for themselves beneath the notice of their masters. The Legion existed in a state of contained anarchy. Discipline bled away by war and indifference

until, only a handful of decades after the Warmaster failed to usurp the Emperor’s throne, they were a brotherhood in name, held together only by their common blood, and that final bond was fast dissolving in the acid of their father’s madness.

On thankless, dried-up Tsagualsa, the Night Lords waited for the end.

Their father was going to die.

He was going to die that very night.

In the turret of a tower so high above the desolate plains it swayed in constant winds, a sculptor was at work. He hummed a tune few alive would recognise, a mindless merchant’s ditty from a world broken decades before.

The sculptor ceased, stood back a moment to judge his work, and was displeased.

The figure did not capture the features right. Yes, it sat still and cold in its throne, arms gripping the rests with the iron tenacity of rigor mortis, just as the man it depicted did. The statue was of human tissue, the flesh that constituted it stolen from living beings and employed as a sculptor’s clay, as was appropriate. Many hours of work had gone into the art, unhurried and precise, though its creator had few hours left to live.

Still, it was not right.

The sculptor was the sole living occupant of the chamber. The darkness was so complete, so profound, that to anything but heat sight or supernatural vision it was impenetrable. The sculptor had a little of both. None but he would have been able to see in that room.

He was a living god, raised on a world of perpetual twilight, one of twenty incredible sons made by a man who was greater than them all, and who was himself a sculptor of sorts.

Konrad Curze was his name, and though he had many gifts bestowed upon him by his father, sanity was not among them.

‘No, no, no,’ he said. To his far-spectrum vision, his breath was a glowing cloud in the frigid air. It was strange, Curze reflected in his saner moments. Dead Nostramo was often stifling. Its darkness he longed for, but the heat he never missed. He was naked except for a short cloak of black feathers that had seen better days, but he did not feel the cold.

‘This will not do.’ Pale hands slick with blood tore off the figure’s face. It was not its original, and came free easily, the neat sutures holding it in place bursting without much effort on Curze’s part. Discarded, the face slapped onto the floor, where it began to freeze.

The man who made up the core of Curze’s flesh statue had been alive when the primarch started, nailed and screwed into place to be vivisected at leisure. His screams had enlivened the atmosphere, until he had selfishly died. Much of that first unfortunate had been replaced: his arms had grown long with extra joints, four mismatched legs were seated in place of the two he had

started with, his torso was split and spliced with a second spine, his head had become a conglomeration of four broken skulls, and silence substituted for his voice.

Curze stood back again. His bare feet padded on the freezing floor without discomfort. He placed his chin in his bloody hand, and looked over his work with a critical eye.

‘I really can’t capture the face,’ he said regretfully.

He remembered it clearly enough; he was a primarch, and even one so damaged as he forgot nothing. But when he tried to capture the face he saw in his mind, it flowed away from him like blood gurgling into a gutter. Frustrated, he paced back and forth, pausing to stare at various angles.

The chamber was large. There was one high window set into the wall that kept out the spearing light of stars. Tsagualsa’s air was thin, its sun weak, and not enough light troubled the surface of the world for most eyes to function at night, but Curze found starlight too bright to bear, and the panes of the window were a midnight collage of armourglass tinted to block it out. What image the tenebrous design depicted was impossible to say, even for him. That was a mercy, for the picture was of the most disturbing sort – the kind which, once seen, forever haunts the small hours, and chips madness from the rock of the sturdiest mind.

To a mortal man the room would have been a terrifying dungeon ripe with death’s stink. Blind, that man would nevertheless have sensed Curze as a darkness in the dark.

There had been mortal men in the chamber. They knew fear no longer.

The walls were stone blended with bone wrenched from a thousand screaming victims. The floor was black iron, patterned with razor ridges, caked in frozen blood. The arms, legs, torsos, heads, brains, hearts, guts and voided shit of two dozen slaughtered mortals were strewn all around, in some places heaped together, all placed without thought or reason – the raw materials for Curze’s statue. More bodies hung from hooks riveted to the walls, the ragged remains of faces locked in death’s agonies.

A sole space was neat: a circle around an iron lectern fashioned in the form of a bat’s outflung wings, which carried a heavy book bound in human skin.

‘What to do, what to do?’

Curze tapped a black nail against his face, sighed, and went back to work. For another hour he ripped and tore and stitched, chewing flesh to softness when he needed to, before pressing the dripping putty into place. He spoke occasionally as he harvested his materials from the floor. Every soft sibilance – Nostraman was heavily blessed with them – whispered over the stone and bone, quiet and poisonous as snakes. Each smacking kiss made as he tore flesh from the piles of corpse parts echoed sharply. His breath rattled. It was a predator’s cave, full of a predator’s sounds. The abode of an ailing

lion, close to death but all the deadlier because of it.

Eventually he nodded in relief.

‘I think I almost have you, father,’ he said, and set himself on the finishing touches.

It took him a while to fit the face he chose to the agglomerate skulls. He stretched it, warming it with tender care before tugging at it with teeth and hands. When he judged the face the correct size, he stitched it in place, taut as a drumskin. The stolen hide rebelled against its new shape, pulling hard against threads spun from human hair, but it held. Curze stepped back, a pleased hiss announcing he was satisfied.

He padded to the far side of the room, and squatted down facing the figure, folding long arms in front of himself as a roosting bat might close its wings. His form had become more bestial since the days of the great betrayal. His fingers were long and clutching, his spine strained against the skin of his back, his ribs arching up to it like those of a vaulted roof, and in brighter places than the chamber, the webs of his veins were clear beneath his pallid skin. This corruption was not his fault. None of this was.

The monstrous statue stared back at him in rigid quiet, its eyes sightless, stretched mouth tight with a rueful smile. Beneath the frozen blood painting the throne, gold glinted.

Curze waited patiently for the figure to speak. Time ticked away towards his demise. Unlike the rapid flood of years of his long life, these last hours stretched ahead, wide and placid, a river close to its joining with the sea. Time at the end was slow and deep, wrinkled still with the turbulence of maybes, yet headed in one undeniable direction.

He was going to die soon, in that palace, on that night, as he had always known.

Curze felt no impatience. He was calm.

‘Father,’ said Curze with a wicked smile.

The figure remained still. The composite jaw was locked, the elongated lips stretched immovably taut.

Curze waited for the words to thump into his mind, and scatter their sadness all over his tattered soul.

‘Konrad Curze,’ he said at length, when the figure said nothing at all. Curze scowled and raked at his ear like a dog. ‘I don’t like that name. Why do you call me it?’

The mess of body parts stared silently back.

‘Silent? So be it.’ Konrad Curze piled up a heap of limbs and sat upon it. ‘So. I am going to tell you a story,’ he said. ‘About why you are a very bad father.’ He tittered. A tic shook its way from his left elbow, up across his shoulders and through his face. It ended with a jerk in his neck that sent his filthy black hair swinging. Curze growled in annoyance at the involuntary

movement, and when he spoke again he did so quickly, so that his speech would outpace his spasms.

‘You know what’s going to happen soon.’ He tilted his head, listening. ‘Can you hear the silence? This place is never quiet. Not ever. Do you know why it is?’ he said conspiratorially. ‘You know why, I know you. You know everything!’ His voice dropped. ‘My sons grieve my coming death. They hate me for not allowing them to prevent it.’ His gaze slid slyly around, coming to rest on a fused ribcage far bigger than a normal man’s on the far side of the room. ‘If they try to stop her, they’ll die, and they don’t want to die. So we will not be disturbed.’ He smirked, then composed himself. He managed to hold the mask of sanity before his tortured face when speaking with his sons, but it was hard not to show it here, speaking with his father. This was far more intimate.

‘Yes,’ he said, answering his thoughts as if the meat sculpture had voiced them. ‘This is you as father and I as son. When we are fathers, we must be strong. When we are sons, we can be weak, for our own fathers are strong for us. I believe that’s the way it’s supposed to work.’ He blinked eyes so dilated the iris was a nearly invisible, compressed band between sclera and pupil. Curze’s sneer dropped away. His expression became open, and ashamed. In that moment he appeared beautiful despite his degeneration.

‘Father, this is my confessional. I don’t expect you to forgive me.’ He said the last part loudly and fast, just in case the figure would offer forgiveness. ‘And I can never forgive you.’ He leaned forwards, his head jutting out on a neck that had grown too long. His bony shoulders hunched up over his head. In their cloak of feathers they resembled the wings of a scavenger bird held high off the carcass it fed upon. ‘I just want you to listen.’

He implored his father silently. When no reply was forthcoming, the sneer returned, and his head jerked again.

Curze giggled foolishly. He pressed his hands together before his face in a mockery of prayer.

‘Forgive me, father,’ he said in rasping High Gothic, ‘for I have sinned.’

The Night Haunter waited for his father’s response to his joke. When none came, he frowned peevishly, and said with irritation, ‘How shall I enumerate your failures? Shall I tell you why your plans will wither eternally, and bear no fruit for Terra’s dead vines?’

He cocked his head, listening to something only he could hear. ‘Right, yes. Of course,’ he nodded. He showed a grin filthy with black teeth. ‘I’m getting ahead of myself. I don’t want to do that.

‘Listen to me, father, this one final time. This is my gospel. My last words before the final vindication.’ He snickered air through his sharpened teeth. ‘Let us start with how I came to be here, with my retrieval from that prison Sanguinius saw fit to put me in.’ He hunkered down. ‘We start with the

beginning of the end.’

TWO

PAY DIRT

Death heralds itself in the most innocuous way, Elver thought later, in those long years on the way to Tsagualsa. Often he didn't have anything to think about, except death. He supposed he didn't have much choice. The single most momentous day was the day death came for him, and it hung around his neck for the rest of his life. It came not with fanfare or dread anticipation, but announced itself with the soft, pulsing chime of an active auspex return.

The noise filled him with dread. He never knew how his forebodings worked, but they did, hinting at awful things about to happen. Never with enough clarity to be actually useful, only enough to have him dwell in a state of fear. He knew the return was bad, right from the start.

The reaction of the rest of the crew of the *Sheldroon* was at odds with Elver's frown. Unlike him, they were excited. Not long after that they were all dead, so who was right on that score, eh?

'Auspex return!' yelled the *Sheldroon*'s Master of Divination, Tolly Kiner. Tolly, like the rest of the crew, had a fancy title, though he lacked the training or certification to back it up. Because he was better than the rest of them at operating the *Sheldroon*'s minimal sensorium, Master of Divination he was.

'What?' Captain Overton craned his neck around, peering over the back of his grubby throne. The gleam of the seat's greasy metal was matched by the avaricious spark in Overton's eyes. 'What are you talking about?' He was a gruff man with unpalatable appetites and a hard temper. Kind words very rarely escaped his fat lips.

You've heard alright, thought Elver. *I can see it. I can see it in your ugly face. You smell money.*

'Auspex return, Master Overton,' repeated Tolly Kiner excitedly. He pressed his face against the rubber collar that shielded the feeble glow of his monitor from the bridge's lumens. 'Pay dirt! It's a good read, metal. There's an active power source. She's on a steady course, sir, ripe for plucking!' He looked up from the viewing collar. His eyes were wide with greed, like two moist opals embedded in soil. 'Pay dirt!' he repeated. Kiner had been a void miner once. He used their terms, and remained as stubbornly filthy as every

asteroid-grinder Elver had ever met.

‘Let me see,’ said Overton, hauling himself out of his throne and pushing his way through the bridge back to the sensorium station. The *Sheldroon*’s bridge was cramped and smelly, much like the rest of her, and far too confined to adequately accommodate Overton’s gut. He barged past other men at their stations. Overton was too miserly to pay for servitors to run the ship. He said whole, living men were cheaper, which they were. The bridge’s overcrowded, foetid conditions were the direct result. The place stank of bad breath, unwashed arses and farts. Many of the ship’s main cogitation systems were housed under the bridge deck to save space for cargo, and their workings made the room so hot the crew worked stripped to the waist, the top parts of their coveralls soaking up the sweat that ran freely from their bodies. They were all men. Overton despised women.

Elver had been bond-traded by his family to Overton’s ship on a twelve year prentice’s contract. He was supposed to meet up with his own people in four more years, by which time he was supposed to be a fully trained helmsman; at least that was the idea. Overton had him manning the attitudinal thrusters ninety per cent of the time, a job a man with half a brain could do, and on most ships did. The *Sheldroon*’s helmsman, Gravek, guarded his chair more fiercely than an eagle did her chicks. If Elver ever got home, he’d be no use to anyone. He was no longer glum about that, it was just a fact.

He shuddered as Overton’s fat, soft belly pressed against him, enveloping him from elbow to backside in unwanted, intimate warmth. The captain patted him far more times than necessary. Such attention from Overton often preceded sadistic beatings, and worse. Elver tensed, but the captain had minimal interest in him at that moment. Overton was bent on viewing the potential treasure, and moved past him quickly. It took Elver half a minute to relax, nevertheless.

The auspex continued its seductive chiming as Overton shoved his way to the angled console. Tolly Kiner relinquished his station with a clumsy dancer’s step, keying on the machine’s vocaliser as he did so. The auspex began to sing data in time with its pulsing chime, accompanying its monotonous tune with flat-voiced lyrics of chemical composition and molecular density.

‘It’s right there, captain, right there on the screen. Take a look. Take a look!’ Tolly Kiner rubbed oil-seamed hands together. ‘Pay dirt, I tell you. Pay dirt!’

‘Alright, alright!’ grumbled Overton, but he couldn’t quite hide his excitement. ‘Let’s see what we have.’

He pressed his eyes to the viewing collar. Green light leaked out around the sides, staining the wrinkles on his face livid.

‘Is it good, captain?’ Gravek called back down the narrow bridge. He was

the one who'd have to do all the work if it was. Catching junk in open space wasn't easy.

'It's metal, that's for sure. Kiner here's right about the power source too, it's ringing nice and clear. Yeah…' His voice trailed off as he digested what the vid screen was telling him.

'I don't like it. I think we should leave it there,' said Elver.

Overton looked at him. 'What?' he scoffed. 'It could be something. Could be anything.' He shrugged. Once again, his attempts at dissembling didn't work. He thought it was something, and valuable.

Elver didn't like Overton's tone. He didn't like Overton at all.

'Yeah,' Elver said. 'It could be anything. It could be bad.'

Overton peered back into the auspex scope. He pressed his face harder into the rubber to block out the light, causing his fat cheeks to overspill the edge.

'Ah, you don't know nothing,' grumbled Overton. He shared this view of Elver often. 'You youngbloods come on board, think you know it all. You don't get to be chartist captain of a vessel this fine by being cautious.'

Elver didn't think the *Sheldroon* fine at all. He thought it was junker, which it most assuredly was. Half a million tonnes of sub-light, rusting, plodding freighter, trekking back and forth on a five year loop between two miserable systems galactic luck put in close proximity to one another, but granted no further advantages than that. If someone had spun him around until he was dizzy and put him down on either Diamante or Xen V, Elver wouldn't have been able to tell where he was. The terminus worlds were as grim and grimy as each other.

Overton's mind was already made up. For reasons of appearing thoughtful and wise, he made the pretence of thinking their course through, when they could all tell they'd be chasing the blasted thing down already.

'There'll be tech, archeotech maybe, and worth a small fortune. There's a lot of gear still floating around after the war. Lots of it.' Overton was greedy, and he never stopped talking about the damned war, though it was done while Elver was a baby. Ancient history. The Warmaster was defeated. In his more bitter moments Elver suspected it wouldn't have mattered a jot to the likes of him if Horus had dethroned the Emperor. He was born into a miserable voider's life and would stay there no matter who was the galaxy's master.

Overton snorted loudly, hawked up a wad of phlegm and spat it onto the deck. It fell through the grating and hissed on the overheated machinery beneath. 'Gravek! Cut speed, bring us into a parallel course with the salvage before it's lost to the void.'

'It'd better be a good find,' moaned Gravek. 'It don't look like much, this little curve,' he tapped the course correction graphic on his scratched display. 'But it'll cost us in fuel and time. It'll take a week to get back up to our current velocity, more if we have to drop below half light.' His objections

were ritualistic, not genuine. He was already slamming levers and depressing buttons. The timbre of the ship's tired old voice changed. Harsh vibrations quivered its void frame as its main manoeuvring jets burst into activity.

Slowing down was time consuming, risky and uncomfortable to the crew, but that was the easy part. Catching the object was where the challenge lay, and when the *Sheldroon* finally had a sympathetic trajectory, still they wasted two full days bringing the salvage aboard.

Elver hurried from the bridge to the catch-bay as soon as the notification echoed down the *Sheldroon*'s leaky corridors. He had been hoping for a piece of worthless junk; though that would have plunged Overton into a foul mood that they'd all suffer for, junk couldn't hurt anybody. Excited shouts squeaking over the vox-net from the catch-bay told him otherwise. Air was still rushing back into the space, so he hurried on his rebreather and tanks in a state of mild terror. When he walked into the crowded bay and saw the salvage, he knew he was right to be afraid.

The smell of the open void worked its way around the imperfect seal of his respirator mask. Some people described the scent as spicy. Dusty, others said. However they perceived the smell, most people seemed to like it; Elver didn't. He thought it was awful, though he'd been born with it in his nostrils. He struggled to describe it. To him it was burning metal, or ionised air scorched by las-beams. Either way, it wasn't pleasant; a chemical stink so harsh and dry it scraped at the inside of your nose until the membranes crackled. Once it got past the nasal cavities, it clawed at the throat. It made him sneeze. It made his eyes water and his nose run. For hours after being in the airlocks or the catch-bay or anywhere else the crew had let the air out and the void in, he was choking on mucus.

At that precise moment, he wasn't worried too much about mucus.

The salvage was gripped by the *Sheldroon*'s extendible salvage claw. The claw ran on ceiling mounted rails that went all the way down the catch-bay's external access tunnel to the single-skin airlock dividing the ship's interior from space. Lumens glared sodium light down the tunnel, lighting the prize in shades of orange as it clanked its way within.

He'd seen sarcophagi a couple of times. Once, his mother's ship had carried a cargo of methalon-suspended specialists to some nowhere outpost. Another time, he'd passed quietly through tombs full of stone coffins made for things lacking human proportions. That was back on Galenar, well over a century ago in objective years. His mother thought he should see a world with plants and a kind sun shining in the sky once. It had only been the once, too. She would never dream of paying for the experience twice.

This salvage, well, that looked like the methalon caskets and the alien sarcophagi: a mummy's case set loose to drift stellar currents, pulled up from stellar chasms by the *Sheldroon*. It was immense, far too big for a human

being. Just standing near it sent his secret talent wild with terror, and he didn't need his gift to tell him it was the height of idiocy bringing the salvage aboard. It radiated wickedness.

The catch-bay wasn't very big; no larger than a hangar for a small lighter. The single skin airlock was small, and not equipped with atmospheric shielding. When the door was open, the catch-bay had to be empty. Operations were controlled from a cramped gallery behind a curved window of age-bloomed plastek. Centuries of patching and jury-rigging had robbed the bay of space and utility. In that respect it was like every other part of the *Sheldroon*.

Bringing anything aboard was time consuming and that cost money, so they mostly didn't use the catch-bay for catching anything, but instead employed it as an ad hoc store, keeping things there that had nowhere else to live. Salvage for the *Sheldroon* was an opportunistic sideline. *Sheldroon* was a blind old thing, its sensorium weak, not intended to find motes of wealth in the grand sweep of the void. The ship's elderly machine-spirit spent its time peering ahead for danger. The mag-prow pushed aside most particulate debris, but anything bigger than half a tonne posed a threat, no joke at near-light speed.

Salvage was a game of chance played on system fringes, not out there in the deeps of the interstellar void. Usually whatever they found was too big to take with them, and nearly always moving far too fast to intercept. If they found a hulk or debris field they would mark its location and sell on the data. Talk of missed glories was the crew's favourite pastime. Teach especially liked to maunder on about the paydays they'd glimpsed but could not catch. Much of it was misty-eyed nonsense. When they brought something aboard it was always some heap of scrap they'd be lucky to get a few double eagles for, and most of that went to Overton.

Not this time. It was obvious right away that this device was valuable. The surface was pitted with debris impacts, but otherwise looked relatively new. A few dull indicator lumens glowed in a deep, lateral channel where elements of machinery were visible. Whatever it was, it was working. It was human built, as far as he could tell, and humming with high technologies. It was smooth, making the rusty, hazard-striped claw that held it seem crude. The whole catch-bay looked shabbier with the salvage in it.

All the passengers and all the crew were there, more or less; only Gravek was absent, jealously guarding his position against any who might usurp him, meaning Elver.

That meant twenty-three crew and four passengers crammed into the bay. The passengers were of a class monied enough to leave their home world, but insufficiently rich to afford a berth on a warp-capable vessel. Three of them, a family party, were as excited as the crew. The fourth – some sort of minor official, Elver thought – travelled alone. He stood aside, his bland, forgettable

face concerned.

Elver understood why the man looked that way. Dread filled the pit of his own stomach like molten lead.

‘We’re going to be rich!’ shouted someone. Teach, Elver thought. It was hard to tell with them all speaking through their rebreathers. The attached voxmitters were of laughable quality, and made everyone sound like malfunctioning servitors.

Elver hung back by the door. Half the crew were down on the bay’s lading floor, ringing the central space where they would let the pod down. The rest stood on the companionway raised around the sides of the room, where it wasn’t crammed with yet more haulage. There was an amount of vox-blurred whooping and cheering. The minimal share Overton would allow the crew would be more money than they’d otherwise make in a lifetime.

If they survived to collect it, thought Elver. He lived in an age of cynics, and he was a purebred example to his pessimistic bones.

‘Bring it in! Bring it in!’ Overton’s vox-garbled voice cut through the ever-escalating tally of salvage payments the crew bandied between each other. These had long since left the realm of feasibility behind, growing larger with each enthusiastic recalculation. A green button was pressed upon a simple control podium. A klaxon grated. Lights spun, and the claw squealed the last few metres down the access way into the catch-bay.

The sarcophagus slipped from the worn grips of the arm as it turned to set it down at the centre of the chamber. The bottom hit the deck, then the whole thing toppled over with a resounding boom, scattering the crowd. For a second there was silence, until a man named Colan Barkar shouted in nervous relief.

‘That drakking thing nearly landed on my foot!’

The men brayed with laughter. Elver felt dizzy. His pulse pounded at his temples. His mouth was dry and sour with the acid of his churning gut.

These feelings were never wrong.

The men gesticulated at one another, their shouts layering over each other’s so that no one voice could be heard.

The pod was chilled from the void cold enough to kill. Atmospheric frost furred it in sheets that grew thick and shaggy before Elver’s eyes.

‘Alright, alright, curb your cheer!’ roared Overton. The jubilant crew refused to be cowed, but the men quieted a little, stepping back to let the quartermaster Dendren Mankor through. Mankor was a worlder born – not like the rest, who were void scum to a man – and had more authority than any of them excepting Overton. He carried a data-slate in an industrial casing, which he proceeded to wave over the sarcophagus. As the sensor snout sucked in information and painted it upon the cracked screen, Mankor’s growing astonishment was plain for all to see through his visor. One by one

the men fell silent.

‘I’m reading a grade fifteen compact plasma reactor,’ he said. ‘A whole bunch of active circuits… Non-organic cogitation units. It’s all working, by the Throne! And, a, and…’ he held the screen up to Overton’s face. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

Overton pulled his rebreather off over his head, leaving it to hang down his back by the straps. He leaned in to the data-slate and read. Gold flashed in his mouth as a smile split his face.

‘By the void, man, it is!’ He grabbed Mankor’s hand and held it up. The slate shed weak light over the crowd. ‘A functioning stasis field!’

‘We’ve lucked out this time! By Terra’s dusty old bones, we’ve lucked out!’ Tolly Kiner whooped, doffed the filthy cap he was wearing and slapped his shoes with it, one after the other, as he danced an uncoordinated jig. ‘Pay *dirt*!’

‘Hang on.’ Mankor pulled his arm back down. He frowned at the screen. ‘There’s something in the field,’ he said.

‘Platinum?’ said someone hopefully.

‘A passenger?’

‘Riches!’ yelled another.

Mankor gave them a withering look. ‘It’s a stasis field. How can I read what it is inside it? It’s impossible. Time’s stopped in there.’

‘Does mean you can’t look in as well?’ said someone. ‘I mean, the light can’t get out, can it?’

Sniggers went around the room.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ Overton rebuked the man, then to the rest, ‘What do you expect from void scum? Of course you can *see*.’ The crew roared with laughter. Normally they’d sulk and scowl at his rebukes, but their spirits were high. ‘There should be a viewing plate. Let’s have a look.’

Overton pulled on a thick glove and scraped ice crystals from the window set in the front of the pod. They reformed as soon as he wiped them away. The others leaned in, shoving to get a look through the limited space. Elver found himself being drawn forwards against his will, but he could not stop his feet from carrying him towards the hunched backs of the others, who scraped and scraped like they were digging into the sand for lost coins.

‘Here!’ shouted Zenzitay Darr, who Elver privately thought a halfwit.

‘I think there is someone in there,’ said Mankor, shoving the man aside.

‘It’s a… It’s a man!’ Teach peered closer then stood up, looking around the crowded circle of his fellows. ‘There *is* someone in there!’

The crew clustered around the small crystalflex pane. Between the shoulders of the others Elver got his glimpse. The stasis field had a weird effect on his vision. There was indeed a figure within; pale-faced, lank hair dark as nightmares, thin, bloodless lips. And he was huge, far too big to be

human – far too big, it seemed, to fit in the coffin, though that was ridiculous. Elver instinctively hated it.

He backed away while the others yammered curious questions at each other.

‘That’s not a man,’ said Elver. The words were choked by fear, barely escaping his lips. But nobody heard, which, as he’d reflect later, was kind of ironic, because he was right. The others had seen it too. They weren’t that stupid.

‘What is it?’ said one of the others. ‘Is it a…’ the man speaking couldn’t get the words out. ‘Is it a Space Marine? One of the Angels of Death?’ That was a horrendous thought. Most of the men laughed it off, but a few swore and spat. Bringing one of the Emperor’s chosen warriors aboard would bring them nothing but trouble.

Overton stood tall, his shift in posture making the rest retreat. He sniffed loudly.

‘That’s no Space Marine.’ He glanced back at the figure. For the first time Elver could recall, the captain seemed cautious, even frightened. A dark warmth pressed at Elver’s mind. He felt like he was going to vomit. ‘Too big,’ Overton said, like that would explain everything.

‘Then what is he? He’s gene-forged, we can all see that,’ said one of the others. ‘Look at him. He’s perfect!’

‘What do you know? Your definition of genetic purity is having parents who aren’t related,’ said another. ‘Unlike yours!’

The following laughter was uncertain, and died quickly. The only people talking were the family group, and they did so in nervous whispers.

‘No, no, Gureau’s right. He’s gene-forged alright,’ said Overton.

Elver edged closer again, sliding between the others to get a better look. He looked into staring, open eyes with no visible white. The black of the pupil and the iris were one, indivisible black circle. The figure wore a spiteful snarl, as if he’d been time-caught delivering curses. His hair was filthy with what looked like dried blood.

Despite this, he was beautiful.

Elver’s world spun beneath his feet. He thought he would pass out there and then. His head became light. A thick buzzing clogged his ears, stoppering them up against external sound. He knew what he was looking at. He just *knew.*

‘He’s a primarch,’ he whispered.

‘What?’ The question was faint, hardly heard through the buzzing.

Elver tottered back, half collapsing onto his crew mates. They complained loudly at his clumsiness, shoving him back and forth. Knots of darkness spun around his peripheral vision. He was finding it hard to stand.

‘He said he’s a primarch,’ said the fourth passenger. He pushed his way

forwards.

‘Who are you to speak?’ said Teach.

‘He’s a primarch,’ said the fourth passenger. ‘That’s what you said, isn’t it?’ He spoke to Elver softly. He exuded a subtle sort of power, and the crew around him drew instinctively back.

Elver nodded, unable to answer, still close to passing out.

‘There you are.’ The fourth passenger stared at Overton, unsuccessfully trying to capture his attention. ‘A primarch.’

‘Rubbish!’ shouted Teach. ‘They’re myths, all dead or gone into dark places.’

‘They’re not dead,’ shouted another. ‘Guilliman, Dorn and the rest are on Terra, aren’t they?’ He didn’t sound sure.

‘What’s a primarch doing out here?’ said Mankor.

‘It’s impossible!’

‘Not impossible,’ said the fourth passenger, with the air of a scholar. The crew listened to him, though ordinarily they’d have robbed a man like that, were they to find him alone. ‘There are a few unaccounted for. All of them are designated *traitoris extremis*.’

‘Ooooh!’ sang Kiner. ‘Get you. Fancy little words. High Gothic man!’

Dangerous tension formed around the crew. The voidborn didn’t like shows of authority or knowledge, especially when it made them look stupid, or suggested they were in danger.

The man ignored them, but addressed Overton directly. ‘Captain, I would cast this cargo out into the void, and forget you ever saw it. The consequences of not doing so will be costly to you and your crew.’

When Overton finally deigned to look upon the passenger, he grimaced. ‘What, so you can sell on the location and get the loot for yourself? I don’t think we’re going to be doing that,’ he said. He held up his hands and shouted to the others. ‘I think, lads, that we are going to be very rich indeed!’

Their cheers fell to groans of disgust when Elver collapsed to his knees, fumbled off his rebreather and puked hard into the deck grating.

Curze paused in his tale.

‘I saw all this, while I slept,’ Curze said. ‘The thoughts of this Elver were mine to share. He was a minor talent, a psyker like you and I. That does not explain, however, why I was aware. No sensation should enter a stasis field, should it, father? Within its field time stands still. The motions of atoms are arrested. I should not have experienced anything. But I did. My mind was sluggish, but thoughts came to me nevertheless through the halted mechanics of the material universe. Now I wonder how that could possibly be?’ Curze said, tapping a filthy nail to lips pursed in a mockery of contemplation. ‘Could it be, my dear father, that your sons were things crafted with more than genomic science?’ He lifted his hands over his head, outstretched,

spreading his feathered cloak wide and wafting his stale odour across the chamber. ‘My brothers always said I was a monster, but we all are. The secrets you employed to make us were not so pure as you pretended. What did you promise for the means?’ No reply forthcoming, Curze tutted. ‘Like father, like son. Horus wasn’t the only one to sell himself to the false pantheon.’

His arms snapped down. He leaned forwards accusingly. ‘Isn’t that so? Answer me!’ he spat through a vicious snarl. ‘Were you in their thrall all the while?’

Lacking a tongue to fill the hollow of its stolen jaw, or the life to move it, naturally the figure did not answer. Curze scowled, rallying his arguments to goad the flesh-sculpture to speak, for had it not before? It had. It had!

Hadn’t it? It had. He was sure.

Curze waited a while for his father to address him, but was sorely disappointed.

THREE

A MONSTER’S ADMISSION

Despite the chill of Curze’s audience room, it reeked of opened guts. The smell refused to disperse. Curze didn’t care. Death’s stench could not disgust him.

‘I didn’t like it in the casket,’ Curze continued. ‘Sanguinius sealed me into it and pushed me from the airlock after our little jaunt around Davin. Most ungrateful. Without me, he, the Lion and Guilliman would never have ended the Ruinstorm. They would never have reached Terra. You could say Horus is dead because of me!’ he shouted, suddenly angry. He hissed through clenched, filed teeth. ‘Did I receive any gratitude? None at all. Not one of them ever had a good thing to say about me.’ He wagged his head from side to side viciously. ‘Even during your vainglorious crusade, they did not agree with my methods, though they so often yielded victory more quickly and with less bloodshed than their own favoured ways of war. They would rather have millions die to their so-called civilised bombs and mass invasions, rather than a few thousand tortured by the murderer’s knife, even when the pain of the few bought the lives of the many! They condemned me, and they beat me and they sought to drag me in chains before your throne.’ Curze leapt up, and stabbed his finger repeatedly at the grotesque sculpture he had made. ‘And you were no better, saying nothing in my defence. You made me this way. You made me to be the fear in the dark. You made me to strike terror into mortal hearts. You made me an instrument of control, to force capitulation. You thought you were so clever, father. Why didn’t you explain that I was doing what I was supposed to do? Why didn’t you tell them that you *approved*?’

There was still no reply. Curze paced back and forth.

‘You weren’t so clever after all. Look at us now! You are dead, whereas I, the unloved, hideous, wicked Konrad Curze, live! I will die before this night is out, in the manner that was ordained. Did you have that? Did you have my certainty, or did you cling to belief in your freedom of will and choose to let Horus gut you?’ He laughed bleakly. ‘Did you see that coming, oh great and marvellous Emperor?’ His mirth sank like blood into sand. ‘Did you, I

wonder? Could you see all the ends of my brothers, as I did? Did you see Dorn torn to pieces, Sanguinius cut down, the Gorgon beheaded by his most beloved brother? If you did, you are a far worse monster than I.'

He cocked his head. Hearing nothing, he scowled.

'You made me this way, Master of Mankind. Another of your stupid miscalculations. You could have made me ruthless, but instead you made me evil. All your plans are so grandiose! Never subtle.' He dropped to his haunches. 'I don't know when I realised I was a monster,' Curze whispered. 'But I remember when I thought I might be. Poor nasty, bloody Konrad Curze. What choice did he ever have? A villain, through and through. Made to bring justice, forever condemned to die for his crimes.'

The exchanger fans vomited up a column of stinking air into Nostramo's endless night. Blades pounded forever on squealing bearings, sucking up the foetid atmosphere from Nostramo Quintus' deep hive levels. Second-hand heat raised the temperature of the apartment to unbearable heights and packed it from wall to wall with the thick smell of overcrowded concourses and sweaty bodies, of malfunctioning reclamation centres and stale water. Over all, the stink of trash choked her, that rich, coppery smell that fills the mouth, so close to the scent of rotten blood. It never washed from her clothes. It never washed from her hair.

That smell was one of a long list of things Talishma would not miss. She was leaving, and she was going in her nicest dress.

Arjash's body had been taken from her to be recycled. All she had left of their life together, of him, were a few personal effects. She'd laid out his best suit of clothes on the bed. She thought it might be symbolic and that it would help. It did neither, for his clothes made a hollow outline far from the shape of a man. It was the best she could do. The lines of his face were blurring in her mind. The few picts she had didn't capture the way he had looked in life. Or maybe they did, and she was forgetting already.

The fans roared on. Their single room apartment had a solitary window. It was too hot in the summer to keep it shut. The noise of the fans demarcated their world, a wall of sound and smell that blotted out the city beyond. Lights on the next hab spire were a shimmering wash of colour, twinkling through the heated air. The grinding of groundcar engines and the wail of the horns in the canyon street played second string to the chopping of the blades. As long as she could remember, the fans had delimited her world.

She turned slowly, taking in every part of her small quarters: the broken folding door that led to the small ablutorial, the awkward cooking space jammed up by the entrance, the chair and the chest, the only pieces of furniture in the room besides the bed… the bed. She couldn't look at it. The bed where she had lain many nights with Arjash, content despite the song of the fans and their choking stench. The only place she had ever felt happy or

safe. The bed that now waited for her body alone, where the clothes of her dead husband rested emptily.

The fans didn't care.

She couldn't stand it. She clamped her hands over her ears and stifled a scream. It was funny, given what she intended to do, that she didn't want to scream. Screams brought trouble. She craved a little dignity at the end. She sobbed quietly, saliva running from her mouth, her eyes screwed up so tightly they vanished. Her face swelled. She never looked her best when she was weeping. Arjash always said that, teasing her tears away. A laugh tried to rise at the memory; it choked off in strangled competition with her sorrow.

She didn't hear the door. She didn't hear the slice of bladed fingers breaking every one of her locks with metallic snaps. Their apartment had been burgled many times. They had many locks. The door was scarred from battery – kicked in, bashed in, broken with hydraulic jacks. This stealthy entrance was gentle compared to the boots that had put the panels through, or the blowtorches that had reduced their first lock to a puddle of metal. Entrance was conducted with respect for the occupants, the intruder keen to inflict no more damage than was strictly necessary. She was still weeping and didn't see him when he bent double to pull his cadaverous frame through and stand, willowy yet hulking, with his inhuman head brushing the ceiling.

But she did smell him. His pungent odour overcame the awful reek of the air exchanger. A heavy smell, redolent of death.

Her sobs died. She took in a hitching breath, removed her hands from her ears and turned to face the creature that had come into her sanctum. She kept her eyes closed for several seconds, listening to him breathe, quiet yet audible over the thundering fans a hundred thousand lives depended on.

'Night Haunter,' she said, opening her eyes as she spoke the words.

'I have come for you,' Night Haunter said. His body was swathed in black rags stitched together from the garments of a dozen looted corpses; no tailor on Nostramo would dare outfit this nightmare.

'Why?' she said. She was too drained to feel fear. The situation was surreal. 'I have done nothing wrong. I have lived all my life as well as I could.'

'You did not dream of City's Edge?'

'Everyone dreams of City's Edge,' she said, her voice small yet defiant. 'I tried to make myself into someone who could go there. I failed. But I did no wrong in trying. I have never harmed anyone, or wished to. I have suffered life here without complaint. Why are you here?'

Night Haunter's eyes glinted. 'The manner of your life is not my concern. It is the manner of your death. The manner of death you have chosen is a crime.'

He took a step forwards, looming over her.

'There were, in ancient places, laws against self-murder,' he said. 'Suicides

were buried without ceremony, in shame, and those caught attempting to kill themselves were often executed.'

'But I want to die,' she whispered.

'Not the way I will end you,' he hissed. 'What I will do to you will make you wish you had opted to live. I am going to hurt you as much as it is possible to be hurt.'

'Why?' she breathed.

'There are no taboos against taking one's life here,' said the Night Haunter. 'Many do. This is not a happy world. But it can be a better one. By killing yourself, you take the easy way out, you encourage others to do the same. You might think you add yourself to a statistic, but your self-murder is much more than that. Every suicide adds to the rot weakening your culture. Every life abandoned is a signal that change can never be effected. You throw your existence away, and in doing so lessen the value of humanity.'

He reached out a hand and ran a ragged nail gently down her face.

'I am going to save you. I am going to save you all. The people of this world will rise above the station of beasts. I will make them. If I have to bathe in the blood of you all to make that happen, then so be it. Justice is my purpose. The only route to total justice is fear. Without fear there can be no order. You will suffer now to feed that fear, so that many others will live, and this decaying society take the slow road to salvation.'

He pulled out a long knife he had made himself. It was unlovely, a murderer's blade, but with it he could carve the most excruciating agonies.

'Wait!' she said. The blade hissed through the air.

'Do not try,' he said. 'You plead for something you have already forfeited.'

The first cut parted the skin on her arm, shoulder to little finger tip, no deeper than the dermis, for he did not want her hide to tear when he ripped it from her living body. It was so swift a movement, the blade so sharp, she did not feel it. Her first unbelieving gasp of pain only came when the blood pattered to the floor.

She clutched her arm, her hand hopelessly unsuited to the task of closing the wound. She began to cry again, this time from fear and pain.

Curze grinned. 'You do not wish to die any longer. I can tell. That is unfortunate, but it must be done.' He advanced on her. 'Feel joy that your death will bring justice to this world. Feel joy that I bring order.' He cut again. This time she screamed. A droplet of warm, wet red dotted his cheek. He fought the urge to lick it off. He must be sober, and serious. 'I assure you I do not enjoy this at all.'

His hearts quickened at the lie.

Curze fell silent. He intended the story as evidence against his father, yet he found he did not enjoy the recollection. A thought bothered him that his actions in the apartment were not dictated by any sort of inevitability, but

driven by his need to let blood. He remembered the encounter clearly. He had lied to the woman. He did enjoy his purpose. He always had.

Did he act as he did because he had to, or because he wanted to?

He twitched. Had he not always thought this way? Had the doubt always been there, at the back of his mind, before Sanguinius tried to tell him otherwise? His brother the Angel: cursed, like he was, to see the future, but so pure, so noble – so convinced that the run of events could be changed.

'So dead,' he tittered, but the laughter was bitter, and tinged with loss.

If only he had had the strength, could he have been like the Angel? Once, Curze had told his brother all that separated them was the accident of the planets they were cast away upon. But doubt nibbled at him. Would Baal Secundus have feared a daemon of the deep desert? Would Nostramo have enjoyed an angelic saviour?

'No,' Curze shook his head. 'He would have died, gutted, blinded, his wings plucked bare. He could not have survived what I did!'

Your brother Guilliman said justice is not enough.

Curze came alert, and looked around himself. The thought was not his own, but it came from no outward source, as far as he could tell.

Mercy is the necessary adjunct to justice, the thought continued. *Without mercy, justice is hard and cruel. Amoral.*

'Justice is hard and cruel and I am hard and cruel!' he snarled accusingly at the figure. 'That is what I am. I can be no other way.'

Is that really true?

He stared at the figure. He could not say if the voice was his own or if the figure had spoken.

He fell into a sulk. His convictions had not been lessened by the Angel's insistence of fate's mutability, but they had been undermined. Sanguinius' words troubled him anew.

'Mercy is a luxury,' Curze muttered to himself. 'Justice must be unbending. Justice is necessary to the rule of law,' he explained plaintively. 'Humans are beasts, incapable of following laws. They try to subvert their own laws at every turn, to remove themselves from the constraints they place upon others. Individuals lie or buy their way out, convinced that they and they alone are special, and beyond the rules that must govern everyone but themselves. They need fear to obey. They need to be taught lessons of pain to learn that they are all accountable. All of them!' he snapped. His shoulders shook, quivering his ragged cloak. 'There can be no justice without fear, no fear without suffering,' he said. He refrained from putting his doubts to his father – he was there to make the opposite case – but the more he attempted to convince the figure of his rightness, the more the doubt gnawed at him, and that angered him. This was supposed to be his valediction!

Chance broke the gyre of thoughts before they turned again. A slave was

coming to the chamber. Curze heard his faltering footsteps long before a mortal man would. They were as clear to him as the reports of artillery, though they padded feather light on the mosaics of human teeth far down the corridor behind the doors. He came alone. The corridor was long, but not so long that Curze's preternatural senses could not hear everything that occurred within. His bastard sons had not even escorted their messenger as far as the entrance. Cowards.

Presently, a tremulous knock sounded.

The door was a heavy thing, made of molecularly bonded bone. The work had been painstaking, and most entertaining to watch. A gang of miserable artisans, assured that at least one would survive, cleaned, shaped and placed the bones for welding by their fellows. When supplies ran out, one of their number was chosen by lot, and dismembered alive in front of the rest, and his bones boiled and cleaned and passed on to the others to continue the work. Curze salivated at the memory of their fear scent. The last had been sent back to the slave caverns, rewarded with fresh brands, his mind broken, though not so broken he could not convey new sermons upon the wickedness of humanity to the others. Thus the gospel of Curze was spread.

'Enter!' growled the Night Haunter.

The door swung soundlessly open until it caught upon a steak of thigh, whereupon it jammed with a soft squelch. A little light came through, and a human male bearing a single candle shuffled around the door's immense edge, a child lost in an ogre's castle.

He placed his light carefully aside and threw himself face down to the floor, so terrified he had to swallow three times before he was able to speak.

'My… my lord. The captains of the Eighth Legion wish to know when you will emerge from your chamber. The hour is late. The appointed time draws near. They wish to speak with you, and dissuade you from your course if they can.'

Night Haunter imagined how the mortal must see the room: the charnel stink, the heaps of flensed limbs, the figure welded by frozen blood to the throne, and most petrifying of all, the Night Haunter himself, squatted upon the remains of men, his retinas silvered by the candlelight. He stared at the man until he squirmed.

'Those are not your words,' he said.

'No, my lord,' the slave was shaking all over. Curze listened a moment to the rodent pounding of his heart.

'Look at me,' said Curze.

Shaking violently, the slave obeyed.

'Are you frightened, little man?' said Curze.

The slave nodded. Of course he was frightened. The man's terror seeped out of every pore, spiking the heavy, bloody smell of the room.

‘My sons are frightened too. That is why they sent you. And they shall know no fear!’ he said mockingly. ‘How enormously amusing. The downfall of my Legion is complete. They are not worthy of my contempt. I am ashamed of my sons, slave, and I apologise to you for their cravenness, sincerely.’ He cupped his hands over his heart. ‘Tell them I said so. Tell them that any one of them that lays a finger on you will answer to me. Tell Sevatar to convey my anger at the nature of this interruption to the others. He will do it properly. Heads will roll!’

‘Sevatar?’ the man looked up in confusion. He did not know the name.

‘Yes, Sevatar! My First Captain!’ Curze leaned down. ‘Oh you brave, poor man,’ he said sympathetically. ‘How could you forget your lord? My finest son. Now go. Tell them to grow stiffer spines, or I shall remove the ones they have.’

‘I… I may go?’ said the slave.

‘Of course you may go!’ said Curze. He laughed, a stepped rise in pitch climbing all the way to the heights of hysteria. The slave flinched.

‘Go on then, run along!’ Curze shooed him jocularly.

Not believing his luck, the slave bowed several times as he backed himself towards the door, careful not to tread on the glistening remains littering the chamber floor.

‘Wait!’ said Curze. He scuttled forwards on all fours to the feet of his father-puppet. A lizard’s tongue flicked over lizard’s teeth. A bead of blood welled on the tip where it stroked an edge as sharp as a flake of flint. Curze sucked it down absent-mindedly. ‘There is one service you can perform for me before you leave…’

FOUR

FUTURE IMPERFECT

Blood steamed. Curze was back upon his mounded cushions of meat, the slave's heart gripped daintily between thumb and forefinger.

'I've forgotten what I was talking about,' he growled. He bit hard. The slave's heart crunched like an apple. Dark blood spurted from the ragged aorta, splattering upon the floor where it froze atop the vitae already there. Curze worried at the tough muscle before it gave up a morsel of flesh. He gestured with the organ.

'No matter,' he said around the meat. 'There are many things I need to tell you. Fate, and how we must follow it. The future is set,' he said. 'You knew. You knew that the Imperium was doomed. I don't know why you tried at all. It was a fool's dream, and we awoke to nightmare.' He spoke through bloody mouthfuls. 'You are like me, father, you see clearly. Sanguinius too, though he is as deluded as you are. When you see the world as we do, how can you possibly put trust in human nature? It is dark, and bleak, and wholly without merit. I have seen deep into their hearts and into their futures. There are only shadows there. You gave me this gift of foresight. Why did you not discuss it with me, or the others? Why did you not explain? Why must we suffer so much?'

Soft rains caressed him, tracing meandering, translucent lines over marmoreal skin. Cold when condensed from the sky, the fall through layers of industrial heat between the spires fed warmth to every drop, so when the rain hit the young transhuman sprawled upon the asphalt roof it was the temperature of tears.

They called him the Night Haunter. He had another name, chosen the moment he was created, but the one who would bestow it on him was as yet an indistinct presentiment, and the name mere apprehension. So Night Haunter was what he called himself, too. An object of terror before he was fully grown. Right then, the legend would not have survived contact with the reality of him. He was weary from the long chase, and had not eaten for four days. His shoulder ached where a pair of slugs were embedded in his flesh. The Night Haunter's differences to the human creatures he dwelled among

were manifold, and not limited to his rapid regenerative powers, but they were among the most remarkable of his abilities. He'd taken the hits in the grainy grey morning. Skin had already formed over the gunshot wounds, sealing the bullets within his body.

He preferred lasers. They had no bullets that needed digging out. They did not carry fragments of the filthy robes he wore inside his body. Already the faint heat of infection flared around the injuries. Night Haunter was unworried; no infection could harm him, he knew this instinctively as he knew so many other things. Still, it was annoying.

That was another difference, that the others did not simply know things; they had to learn. It had been a surprise to discover this, though quickly assimilated, and the surprise forgotten.

The bullets were painful. Even his physiology could not dissolve solid carbon. They ground upon the bone of his shoulder blade painfully, and would continue to do so until prised free.

For a few moments he rested, lying face up on the rough dampness of the asphalt. Rain filled the hollows of his eyes, blurring the view, before running down his face.

This is how it feels to weep, he thought.

He had never wept.

Spire-sides reached for the churning, ever-present clouds. A hundred thousand lights shone from their rockcrete skins: apartment windows, advertising hololiths and low-yield laser displays that flicker-painted brand names onto the falling rain. No amount of illumination could drive back Nostramo's darkness. The sun shone somewhere on the far side of the cloud barrier. He had never seen it. No education but innate knowledge told him the sun was there, and that it was unusually weak, but that beyond the boiling purple and black of the cloud layer were trillions of stars, each with their own daughter worlds bathing in their light.

He did not question how he knew these things, just as he did not question how he knew that the bullets had to come out. It was immutable fact. Remove them, or suffer compromise to his ability to kill.

Relaxed now, he closed his black eyes and let his mind run ahead of the moment, his thoughts tap-tapping at the strands of probability, awaiting a returning quiver of truth. There were many futures, but only one that would come true. The true line had a particular feel. The others were illusions. He rarely saw what would happen exactly. Most often he felt things: a foreboding, an urge to move on, a shudder, a coldness. Never joy. There was no joy.

He opened his eyes. He was safe for now. He knew with absolute certainty that his pursuers had lost him, and would not pick up the trail for some time. When they did, he would be waiting.

Before that happened, the bullets had to come out.

He got to all fours, and bounded across the roof, feet and hands splashing in puddles scented with pollutants. On the far side was a lamp pole topped with a single, incandescent bulb. Within its circle of wan light was a shelter, which housed a stairhead leading to the lower floors. An array of air purifiers around the stairhead sucked in dirty air, forced it through filters and hooted it down pipes into the building. He did not go there for the light – he could see in near perfect dark – but for the noise of the filtration system. Though he doubted he would cry out when he removed the bullets, he could not guarantee it. He was adaptable, reckless or cautious as the occasion demanded; now was a moment for caution.

He hid himself between the machines and the rickety shelter, squatting, shuffling his limbs about to give his arm the longest reach, and groped over his shoulder.

There was no hesitation. He plunged his talons into himself without a second thought. He gritted his teeth as his ragged nails bit into the skin. A soft grunt escaped his lips.

The first bullet was easily found. Pain stung him as he dug about in the muscle, noting as he did the knots formed in the fibres by their healing over the slug. Wedging his fingernail under the bullet, he turned his hand palm up, and flicked it out.

It pinged onto the mesh covering of the purifiers, fell through, and rattled about in the machine’s innards down into the building.

He paused, alert. Warm rain ran with warmer blood.

Nothing. Nobody heard, or nobody cared. Fear kept most people from investigating strange noises. Firstly fear of gang members, lately fear of him.

The second bullet was buried outside comfortable reach. He grunted with frustration, twisting, and turned his arm, forcing his elbow down with his free hand as he scrabbled about in his bleeding flesh. His nails brushed the bullet, causing it to slip about in the wound. The pain he could bear. The annoyance was more than he could take. Three times he got the tip of his forefinger nail into a nick in the metal before it slipped away, the movements of his body sucking it back in. Each near excision was a moment of frustration, punctuated by a tugging pain.

He let out a strangled cry of frustration. Finally, he caught the bullet, pulled it out, and dropped it onto the roof. Black blood swirled in the skin of standing water. He fished about a little more for the threads of cloth driven into his muscle; these came easily, the hurt they gave as he pulled them out perversely satisfying.

Finished, he leaned his head back onto the shelter, and with his hands crossed over his lap, allowed himself to sleep.

The day was a little brighter than the night. A certain flatness took hold in

the mornings. At noon, on days when the clouds were thinnest, a broad, pale patch sometimes appeared in the sky where the sun guttered. Otherwise everything always appeared the same – the dark, the advertisements, the dwelling lights, the rumble of traffic. The change in light was infinitesimal, invisible to everyone but him, and the brightest day was never lighter than a cloudy midnight on ancient Earth. It was, however, enough for him to judge the passage of time. When he woke it was morning. He had slept for several hours.

A noise in the alleyway drew his attention. The permanent heaps of garbage that choked Nostramo Quintus' lesser thoroughfares made it difficult to move quietly. Someone was trying, and failing, to be stealthy.

He rotated his shoulder. Better. The wound had healed again and the muscles ran smoothly. The heat of infection was gone. The scab was already coming off. Soon the injury would be a scar, and soon after, not even that.

He crept towards the lip of the roof, and peered into the alleyway.

The building was a tenement of ancient design. An older Night Haunter would have recognised the prefabricated sections as STC prints. He did not know that it had stood there for ages, the durable material barely showing the passage of millennia. It had been built upon a hillside in forgotten centuries, one of several dozen gradually swallowed by the hive. The ground was too unstable to support anything larger, and so they had not been demolished but remained while the area became a seedy district hemmed in by starscrapers. The perfect hunting ground.

Two youths were in the alleyway, knives out, looming over a young female, about to do what heartless young males did to women a thousand times an hour in the grim confines of the hive. They were street dregs, parentless and murderous. She was better dressed than they, of a higher caste. Whichever syndicate sheltered her people would seek these youths out and slaughter them for their temerity. It would not come to that.

They were too busy cutting the clothes from their victim to see Night Haunter drop from the roof behind them. Ragged wings of cloth fluttered enough to give them warning, if they were vigilant. They were not. They were too occupied with their sordid pleasure to pay attention to the soft footfall of his landing, or the padding of his feet as he crept towards them, his hunched, cloaked form a darker shadow among the shadows.

Their blood was up and they were laughing. The girl wept softly. They were loud and she was quiet because both parties assumed no one would come to her aid.

The Night Haunter was close enough to smell the youths' unwashed bodies over the pervasive garbage stink.

'Let her go,' said the Night Haunter.

The Night Haunter knew many things, including dozens of languages he

had never heard. But Nostraman he'd had to learn. In later life he would appreciate it as a language of a rare sort, so far evolved it no longer resembled the universal tongue mankind had taken to the stars from Old Earth. It had become soft, crammed with rushing sibilants. Its users favoured poetic metaphor over directness of expression, a romantic sensibility evolved to cover the pitilessness of its speakers.

One of the first expressions in Nostraman he had learned was his name.

'Night Haunter!'

They turned to face him. Though Night Haunter was not yet fully grown, he towered over them, an apparition clad in midnight, flesh so pale it seemed to glow in the gaps of his ragged cloak.

One boy's bladder betrayed him, and the spoiled citrus tang of urine joined the heady melange of alley scents. The other was braver. He clenched his teeth and lunged with a knife ground out of scrap.

'You die first,' said the Night Haunter.

The young primarch wrapped long, strangling fingers around the youth's head, lifted him up, and with a quick flick of his wrist snapped his neck. The corpse danced a marionette's jig on wires of misfiring nerves.

Night Haunter smiled at the second boy, whose effusion of fluids extended now to snot and tears. The boy blinked big black eyes up at the Night Haunter. Seized utterly by terror, the child he was emerged from behind the mask of the thug.

The monster hissed one quiet word through perfect teeth.

'Run.'

The boy stumbled over refuse on trembling legs, slamming into walls. He picked up speed as he regained control of his body. The sounds of his flight merged into the background hum of the city.

The Night Haunter let him go and stared curiously at the girl, the dead youth still clutched in his fist. She was nearly naked, and though he had an innate understanding of human biology he examined her carefully. As he gazed, he wondered if he would feel a stirring of the drives that corroded men's decency and turned them into fiends.

He felt nothing, not even pity.

His scrutiny sent her scrabbling back over sacks of ancient filth, clutching her ruined clothes to herself, more terrified of her rescuer than she was of her assailants. With nowhere to go, she stopped, pinned by his unblinking gaze to a bed of refuse, frozen as prey in the eyes of a hawk.

He looked away. Nothing to learn there. No understanding of why these men had attempted to do what they had, only a desire to stop it; not for the girl's sake, never to save the innocent. He did not care about individuals. He cared about order.

The Night Haunter gave the girl's attacker a two-minute head start before

casting aside the dead youth and setting off in pursuit. The girl he left behind, still vulnerable. No offer was made to escort her home and see her safe. The punishment of the crime was of more importance than her life, such was the Night Haunter's understanding of justice – uncompromised by doubt, vengeance, mercy or ethics. Order must rule, or else there was only chaos.

He left the alley in a rush of black, leaping from wall to wall to avoid the yielding morass of rubbish. In places he scuttled along the brickwork in a display of acrobatics that appeared to defy physics. He had given his prey time to run a little ahead to prolong the chase, but not so long that he could escape.

Never that.

The boy's name was Karzen, not that many people cared, and none would remember. A life blighted by torment and uplifted solely by adrenaline jags of random cruelty was coming to a close.

The Night Haunter is coming. The words locked his mind up. *The Night Haunter is coming.* Round and round they went on tracks, like the sky-vids for the long-distance inter-hive trains he could never afford to ride.

The Night Haunter!

He blundered through stinking mounds towards the lights of a larger street. The road ahead belonged to the Crimson Coda – not Karzen's gang, and way out of his own territory. Being caught there would be a death sentence, but his pursuer trumped any danger posed by lesser men, and he flung himself towards the road as if it were the safest sanctuary in all the universe.

The sound of traffic rumbled up the alley. The piled rubbish petered out to a layer of damp, compacted dross. The boy's heart raced and his breathing bubbled in his throat, mixed with phlegm and surges of vomit. His legs were like rubber. He could not run properly, though his heart and his mind screamed at his body to move. He'd seen the effect of fear in others, when he hunted with his pack-kin, chasing down rivals or easy meat to cut and rob. It made him laugh to see their terror. He didn't like it now he felt it himself.

There was the street, the lines of light and activity where rundown Old Town gave out to proper places, where the buildings were tall like buildings should be, and groundcars raced along four-lane carriageways to unguessable destinations. Fate cruelly dictated that the last stretch to safety be long. He saw pedestrians passing the alley entrance, heads down and eyes sharp. Groundcars whisked by, headlights brighter than deep-hive rats' eyes, the occupants snug and safe behind armoured glass. A hive spire rose on the far side of the road, the lower windows dark, covered over with grilles and mostly broken, but the higher ones glowed – domiciles where families lived, safe places as any on that violent world.

Safety. People. He glanced over his shoulder, dared a grin when he did not see the Night Haunter on his trail.

The boy came within touching distance of salvation. A dagger blade of lemon light cut into the alley's darkness, throwing long shadows from every lump of trash and turning the chemical rain into droplets of molten diamond. Karzen stumbled in a half-sprint, fingertips reached for the street, so close to the light, gasping with relief.

The terror in the dark took him then, on the cusp of hope. An iron hard hand closed around his ankle and yanked him back into the dark.

Nothing but a faint scream escaped into the traffic. On the streets of Nostramo Quintus, nobody heeded such a sound. The pedestrians and cars hurried on, caring only for their own lives.

The Night Haunter had him. Karzen swung around in its grasp as the beast scaled the side of a building, dragging itself up crumbling rockcrete one-handed. Karzen thought he would freeze from the terror, start to beg like the weak always did in the face of the strong, but animal instincts overrode his petrified consciousness and forced him to fight. He did so without finesse, but with great strength and savagery, all limitations the human body places upon itself to avoid damage removed in this last ditch attempt to live. He might as well have clawed at a mountain. Compared to the supernatural might of the Night Haunter, he was less than nothing.

At the top of the wall the Night Haunter threw Karzen overhand onto the roof. He felt something break in his ankle even before he bounced hard on the rockcrete, scraping skin off knees, palms and a good part of his face.

He blubbered, hardly daring to lift his eyes. When he did, he was alone again. The monster had gone. He collapsed and lay sprawled, looking over his shoulder. He wiped his hand over his face, clearing his eyes of stinging water. No sign of his tormentor.

Pain burned his foot when he got up. It didn't stop him. Nothing could. Terror had its lash across his back. He hobbled towards the far side of the building, where again the light of the street beckoned him. Advertising strobes coloured him with fragments of slogans for products he could never afford, dazzling as they swept past and plunged the area back into gloom.

A heavy strike broke four of Karzen's ribs and sent him back down. He managed to roll over before the thing was on him again, a huge, merciless hand snatching his feeble boy's arm away from the knife holstered at his side. A second hand encircled his skinny ribcage, pinning him to the roof. Karzen screamed and punched ineffectually at his captor. The Night Haunter leaned over into the blows, taking them on his angular face. Karzen punched and punched until his knuckles split. The Night Haunter did not so much as flinch. Panting, Karzen let his hand flop down to the roof.

This was the Night Haunter: a pallid face of hard angles. Eyes as black as any Nostraman's glittered with an inhuman intelligence. Thin lips parted. Seeing how white and even his teeth were, Karzen saw his captor anew. He

was filthy, and stank with street living and careless murders, but under the grime he was…

‘Perfect,’ whispered the boy.

The Night Haunter tilted his head, intrigued. The rain fell heavily. Wet, reeking hair brushed against Karzen’s cheek. Water rusty with old blood coursed from it.

‘What are you?’ said Karzen, his fear pushed aside by unexpected awe. He didn’t expect an answer, certainly not the one he received.

‘Justice.’ The Night Haunter’s reek breathed over the boy’s face, a stew of raw meat and bad blood.

‘Justice?’ gasped the boy, a ludicrously quaint word, rarely heard on Nostramo.

‘Justice,’ said the Night Haunter. ‘Justice is the underpinning of civilisation. Without justice, there is no peace. There is no quiet. There is no calm.’

He released Karzen’s hand. The boy made no attempt to go for his knife, but watched as the pale fist clenched, leaving fore and index fingers out, black nails ready to drive into his eyes and the brain behind.

And then the Night Haunter gave a low moan, staggered upright, tottered a few feet and collapsed in a drift of ragged black cloth.

Sensations of another time and place hit the Night Haunter with the force of a collapsing building.

His prey wheeled away into a tiny, black dot. Other sights burgeoned in his place, swelling from motes of sapphire light to scenes of living reality. Two laid over each other in complex interdimensionality, differing images pushing through each other, yet remaining whole.

He saw himself, taken with a moment’s doubt, a questioning of his assumptions that had him pause as the boy pushed himself backwards along the rooftop and Night Haunter extended a saviour’s hand instead of an executioner’s blow. Hesitantly, the boy stopped. The boy reached out. The boy…

…*Karzen.* The name came to him from unrealised futures…

…the boy grew under his guidance. His horizons expanded beyond the criminal margins that had trammelled him. A life of good works beckoned, more killers taken from the streets and changed, like he, from murderers to mentors, by the spreading of the word of the Night Haunter, each transformed soul a little force to the lever of change until, with rushing power, the rules of blood were scratched out and a new social contract took hold.

For this, the boy thanked the Night Haunter, and he was loved for the change he brought.

This happened.

But this also happened.

The Night Haunter saw himself, taken with a moment's doubt, a questioning of assumptions that had him pause as the boy pushed himself backwards along the rooftop and Night Haunter extended a saviour's hand instead of an executioner's blow.

The boy took his chance, and rammed his knife hard into the Night Haunter's side, some fluke pushing it through the armoured box of his ribcage and into the meat of his primary heart.

That would not kill him. It could not, but it hurt, oh it hurt. And the boy…

…*Karzen.* Same boy, different future…

…the boy lived. The boy prospered. His legend as the man who had faced the terror in the dark grew and grew. A rise to power greased with blood, a climb to the heights of influence upon a ladder made of raw bones. A thousand killings he committed, at first by his own hand then at his command, and still it was not enough to garner all he craved. Money. Power. Women. A thousand other lives paid taxes of blood to build his future.

The Night Haunter was less feared because of the boy's escape. He was vulnerable. Death could be cheated. As fear lessened, his task became harder. By the time the man the boy had become was tracked down to his lair, many innocents had perished.

'You made me,' said the older boy, in both visions, both as an apostle of a gentler age and devil of its worsening hell. 'You made me,' said the grown man, through strangulation and through grateful tears, whether the same pale hands choked his throat or caressed his face.

There can only ever be one future, thought the Night Haunter. *Only ever one.*

The kinder fate dimmed, obscured and extinguished by the darker. If, for a moment, the Night Haunter had stopped to turn these sights about in his mind, he might have apprehended the truth of choice – that both futures were valid, and favoured eventuality could be coaxed into being. But his sight was dark indeed. He saw only the need for immediate retribution.

Night Haunter's eyelids flickered. His eyes rolled in their sockets, flicking from black to white and back. He let out a piteous moan. The boy pushed himself backwards along the rooftop, then got up, and tentatively approached. Why he did so was beyond Night Haunter's understanding. It would have been better to flee. Two possibilities flickered with migraine intensity. Would the boy aid him, or would he strike? There could only be a single outcome, and Night Haunter gave one no credence at all.

Fate could not be allowed to make mistakes.

Night Haunter's hand struck, serpent fast, seizing the boy by the throat. The boy's eyes bulged in panic, yet almost as suddenly the fight went from him, and he accepted the sentence Night Haunter gave in his capacity as judge, jury and executioner.

Night Haunter squeezed, his hand more effective than any noose. Bones went to powder with a small, wet crack. The boy's eyes were already dulling as Night Haunter lowered him to the floor with obscene tenderness.

For the first time, he looked at his victim, noting the gang marks plastered over his stunted body. Chronologically, the boy was probably some years older than the Night Haunter, but he was young, very young.

Age did not matter. Guilt did.

'Justice,' he whispered.

There was work to be done, a message to be written in mutilated flesh. Thin lips bent to a face doomed never to grow old, puckered as if for a kiss. Night Haunter sucked the eyes out first, to see what the boy had seen, he told himself, and not for the taste of the warm jelly inside.

He feasted hungrily. Fragments of the boy's past coursed through his memory, torn from the molecular machinery of his cooling body by Night Haunter's strange gifts. Where Karzen had hidden to sleep, who his people were, where his gang mates could be found. The Night Haunter gleaned much information this way. Many new judgements were born in that instant. Sentences of death were passed on a score of sinners who, unaware that the end was coming for them, went about their last few hours ignorant of fear. Their deaths would be regrettable, Curze told himself, while anticipating them eagerly; inevitable, necessary sacrifices to raise mankind up from its animal habits.

Curze had no faith in humanity. He saw, but did not process, the knife lying some metres away, fallen from its sheath, far too far for the boy to have grabbed it, and he did not remember what could have been.

There could be only one future, one road to civilisation. Cobbles of bone paved it. Rains of blood washed it. Peace lay at the end.

Justice dictated it be so.

'You see? You see!' accused Konrad Curze, waggling bloody fingers at the corpse-father. 'You do, don't you! Humanity can only be pushed into civilisation by great men. You relied upon a better nature that did not exist. I am better than you because I saw that clearly, without your naivety.' He covered a smirk with his hand. 'And they say I am mad! Did I take an improbable title to myself? No!' he said. He ticked the point off a gore-hung finger. 'Did I seek to subjugate all of the human species to my will? No. Did I command the genocide of entire races, burn civilisations, destroy worlds full of life to fulfil my dreams? No, no, and no!' He screamed the last, then recoiled from possible retribution.

Silence. Cold. Dark.

Receiving no punishment, he became sly. 'I killed, tortured, and hurt. This is true, but only ever a portion of those I encountered. Only ever *enough* to make the dull herds stop, and rethink, and let their knives sleep in their

sheaths. I told them the truth. I said to them, stop the bloodshed, and I will stop mine. I said, listen to the fear in your hearts, and those that remain will be spared. Whereas you, you tricky, wicked, devious father, you sold a lie of golden futures, until the mirror cracked, and all the darkness concealed beneath poured out. A lie, I suppose, is a small crime, if it is small. But the lies you told! Oh the *lies*!' He held up his hands, blood wet and black. 'The enormity of them! The audacity! Not one of the atrocities I have committed can possibly compare to a lie of that scale. Every dead child, every society burned, every species I chased from life into history to please you… What are these crimes compared to the truth you kept from us?'

He huddled lower, wrapping his feathered cloak about himself, as if the cold had finally seeped deep enough within his skin to bother him.

'I was justice, as you made me. I bought billions of lives with the pain of a few million where my brothers slaughtered, and bombed, and slew. And yet I am the monster. I was the thing in the night, despised as much as feared, while they were your shining paladins. Great Horus! Glorius Fulgrim!' He sniggered. 'Their betrayal you either failed to see, or lied about to us all. *And I know which it is.*' He stared into the eye-pits of the thing he had crafted. 'You knew, you always knew.'

Curze looked away and coughed, worked a nail in between a gap in his teeth to free the scrap of heart meat caught there, then chewed it thoughtfully. He inhaled sharply, a human sound of realisation.

'I forgot! I forgot!' he said brightly, his resentment quite forgotten. 'I was telling you how I came to be here, on Tsagualsa. I stopped, didn't I? How impolite. Let us continue.'

FIVE

THE FIFTH PASSENGER

Elver’s dreams were never pretty. Thematically, they cleaved to bones, and blood, and rains of fire. Cities of embers where ash snowed from the sky in endless fall featured heavily. His nights were one long apocalypse. On the rare occasions his dreams were free of burning, he suffered Overton visiting his cabin with all his furies, to give out beatings for his insolence, or his youth, or whatever else Overton contrived to be offended by. The dreams were almost as bad as when he had come calling for real, back when Elver was young and incapable of fighting him off. On the even rarer occasions he was spared armageddon and the captain, he dreamed of home on his birth ship. To his reckoning, the last were the worst of all. Not for the dreams, which were pleasant, but for the crushing disappointment of waking.

Unsurprisingly, Elver didn’t like to sleep. When he had to, as every human being must, he did so with a large degree of help. Much of Elver’s pathetic wages went on pharmaceuticals, narcotics if he could get them, with alcohol taking a distant but necessary third place. Knocking himself out was the only way for him to sleep. If he took nothing, he lay awake in his tiny berth dreading unconsciousness. He called this triumvirate of intoxicants his helpmates. In reality, he was a hopeless addict.

Luckily for him, the Imperium’s vastness produced a bewildering range of drugs, and his existence as a chartist spacer gave him access to a happy fraction of contraband. Though the *Sheldroon* was restricted to five ports in two systems, this tiny slice of mankind’s realm was far more than most people ever got to see, and ripe with opportunities for desperate men.

Elver considered himself a desperate man.

The night they dragged the sarcophagus aboard Elver dreamed of dark corridors rank with sweat and ringing with screams. The drugs fractured the dreams into jigsaw fragments, all unpleasant, but far better than remembering them whole. The drugs made it hard to wake. Thanks to them, he slept through the beginning of the crisis.

He came round to the breathless, short-interval blare of the *Sheldroon*’s general alarm. Someone in the corridor was pounding on the door with an

insistence that suggested they weren't going to go away any time soon.

Metal muffled the shouting, but not enough to render it inaudible.

'Elver! Elver, Emperor forsake you! Elver! Wake up!'

'What?' A fuzzy, disconnected feeling squeezed Elver's waking mind into a useless ball. His mouth was dry, all his spit seemed to have run out onto his chest. He wiped his face clean on the back of his hand, wincing at the tart smell the drugs gave his breath.

'It's me, Elver! Endson. Open the damned door!' Endson was one of the less objectionable members of the crew. That didn't make his intrusion welcome. Elver groaned and pulled his dirty pillow over his head.

The thumping stopped for a few seconds. Any thoughts of relief Elver had at Endson's departure were chased away when the pounding recommenced, this time as metal clanging on metal. Endson's pounding fell into time with the alarm.

'Elver!' Endson screamed. 'I'm not going until you're out of there!'

Quite obviously, Endson was not going to leave him alone.

'Alright, alright!' Elver rose, and groped his way to the door, kicking an empty bottle across the floor on his way. Maybe chasing the tranquillisers down with a half litre of life water hadn't been so clever.

He was shaking hard from his drugged sleep. His limbs were cotton soft. Two attempts saw the door release depressed and Elver exhausted all over again.

The door slid back at just the wrong moment, and Elver nearly received a fire-suppressant canister in the face.

'Why are you hitting my door with the extinguisher?' Elver asked, genuinely perplexed.

'You weren't getting up!'

'That's because I don't want to.'

Endson goggled at him. 'But everyone's got to come. Captain says.'

Elver squinted at him. Endson's face was having trouble staying still, wafting about like smoke.

'By the loyal nine, you're drunk again!' Endson said.

'Always am, off shift,' slurred Elver. 'Can't sleep.'

'Pull yourself together! The captain wants everyone.' Endson's wavering face was coalescing into a canvas of slack-mouthed fright. 'Come with me!' He grabbed Elver's arm and dragged him into the corridor.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Where do you think?' said Endson breathlessly. 'The catch-bay!'

Like everyone else, Tolly Kiner was summoned to the catch-bay, but he was in no kind of hurry. He was down in the bilges of the vessel. No one went down there unless they had to, which is why Kiner liked it – that and because it reminded him of the mines he once worked, before an indiscretion with a

jack hammer and another man's face forced his career into this new direction.

'Kiner, Kiner, you can hear this, I know it, get yourself up here now.'

The vox spoiled the quiet. Kiner tutted and slapped his hand onto the vox set at his waist, turning it off. Similarly, he ignored the clamour of the alarms, easily done down there where they were faint and unimportant.

No one but a man used to the worst conditions would want to brave the bilge's foetid vapours, and the tainted water slopping around in the collection tanks. All because men needed water to survive, and were forced to take it everywhere they went. The number of wars in humanity's history fought over water were beyond enumeration. Tolly Kiner wasn't particularly aware of that, but he did know that without water, there could be no life.

Water had its ways. Water was not an easy prisoner. It did not like confinement, but took every opportunity to escape, corroding its way through ancient pipes, or worming out past inadequate seals. As always, water ran down, towards the very bottom where there was nowhere else to go. It made no difference that the gravity it obeyed was artificial; as long as there was a down, water would find it.

That is why void ships needed bilges, no different to the vile gutters of ancient, wooden sailing vessels. Every drip of errant condensation, every slop of sewage from ruptured waste pipes, every spilled sip of the crew's synthol rations trickled its way to ugly tanks where it mingled with fuel and oils and who knew what else into a scummy soup.

In a well-run ship, the liquid would be drawn off for reprocessing, the tanks desludged and scrubbed at every dock. The *Sheldroon* was not a well-run ship. Its bilges overflowed, the fluid slopping out of its appointed place. The lack of cleansing provided opportunity for creatures other than men. There, life's strange alchemy had taken hold and made a little world.

The bottommost deck stretched out three hundred metres either side of the access stair and the companionway at its centre, and hundreds more metres fore and aft, all filled with water. A rusty lifter platform was situated some way further on from the staircase foot, but Kiner never used that. Its snarling motors destroyed the peace of the place.

Sump water rose far past the lips of the square containment tanks – visible beneath the surface, furred with algal growth – and washed over the lower walkways. In places protoplants mounded up to make small islands. There wasn't much functional space down there; the ceiling did not need to be high and therefore was not. Cabling hung low enough to strangle an incautious man. Lumens offered glowing bump hazards. The bilges hadn't been made for life, human or otherwise, but Kiner found diversion in this metal-bound swamp.

The bilges supported a surprising diversity of creatures. There were the obligatory rats, whose kind had spread as far and fast as humanity across the

stars, but there was so much else besides. Mutant insects of a dozen worlds. Darting, luminous amphibians evolved within the hulls of other ships and spread via contaminated supplies. Slick bodied predators with needle teeth. Nobody else cared about the *Sheldroon*'s out of place biome. Kiner kept its secrets to himself. He had become something of a naturalist, albeit of an amateur sort.

He hummed as he poked about in a slime-choked tank. Rich organic odours burped up from the bottom as he raked his pole along it. The smell of the bilges was calming, nowhere near as bad as it should have been considering what went into the tanks. The clamour of the alarms from the higher decks got louder. The captain's command went ship-wide, crackling out into the bilge level from rarely used fluted vox-horns clustered over the central walkway.

'All crew to report to the catch-bay immediately. That means you too, Tolly Kiner!'

The horns snapped off with a rustle of static. The echoes took a long time to die, and the creatures in the depths only resumed their business when they did.

Kiner scowled up at the horns.

'Leave me alone!' he grumbled. His vox set twittered, demanding to be turned back on.

The alarms were beginning to get to him. He looked to the stairwell, where the majority of the light in the bilges came from. Most of the lumens were out, or filled with water and slime and dimmed to uselessness.

'Throne curse it all,' he said.

Regretfully he laid down his pole, dusted off his knees, and turned, whereupon he walked right into a giant he had utterly failed to see.

He took a step back. He couldn't see up to the thing's grinning, luminous face without doing so.

Eyes dark as forever looked down at him. They bore him no malice, they were perhaps almost kind, but there was a fever twinkling far back in them that hinted at unplumbable insanity.

'Hello, mortal. What is your name?' said the creature, in a manner that would have been pleasant were it not for the cold radiating from it, and the abattoir smell of its breath.

Tolly Kiner's jaw flopped wide. He tried to take another step back preparatory to fleeing, but his foot dangled over water, and he was forced to stay where he was.

'T-T-Tolly. Tolly Kiner,' said Tolly Kiner.

The creature moved a step closer. Kiner tensed and leaned back, teetering on the edge of falling into the pool. The giant wore nothing but a ragged gown showing pale flesh hatched by a thousand scars and seamed with grime. It exuded a peculiar odour that managed to be alluring, despite the creature's

filthiness. A fly buzzed past Kiner's head. They often started to bother him after he'd been down there a while, but none went anywhere near the giant.

'Tell me, T-T-Tolly Kiner, who now sits upon the throne of Terra?'

Kiner's brow creased at the question.

'Is it the Emperor? The Emperor of Mankind?' said the creature.

Tolly was a simple man, and could not comprehend another had almost taken the Emperor's place not very long ago. He nodded.

The giant exhaled a gust of pure indifference. 'So father won. I knew he would. I saw it, after all.' He reached out a hand and pushed up Kiner's chin with the tip of one blackened, ragged nail. 'And what is the current date?'

'I-I-I-I–'

'Shhhh,' said the giant. 'You are a crewman upon a void ship.' He gestured expansively at the bilge-swamp. His manner was so hypnotic Kiner saw the place in a new and glorious light. 'A hero of the space ways. A man like yourself must know the year? Vessels must keep logs, surely. Or was the victory as bad as defeat?'

'The… the date?' said Kiner.

'Yes, the date,' said the creature.

Tolly Kiner swallowed. 'It's, I think, so far as we can tell, not having our own Astropath and such, it is millennium thirty-one, year thirty-two, accepting a plus or minus deviation of two to three years, as is to be expected.'

'Plus or minus deviation,' said the creature approvingly. 'Now you sound like a space farer, Tolly Kiner, and not a sump grubbing insignificant! Thirty-one or thirty-two, you say?'

Kiner nodded enthusiastically.

'So short a time?' The creature sighed. 'Oh well, I suppose it could have been worse. Such as, an eternity,' he said. He looked expectant at this witticism, and expected Kiner to share the joke.

'A-a-are you a primarch?' blurted Tolly Kiner.

The creature grinned ferally.

'Yes, I am a primarch,' it said. 'I am the most cursed of the Emperor's cursed sons.' Sharpened teeth made for a shark's smile. 'Cast out into the void by my loving brother, the so-called Great Angel of Baal. Until you happened along.' He prodded the man in the chest. The force of the touch made Kiner whimper. 'I doubt that's common knowledge, so I am certain you're wondering which one of the twenty I am. Can you guess?'

Tolly Kiner shook his head.

'I'll wager you do know,' he said brightly, then added threateningly, 'say my name.'

Kiner swallowed. He had an inkling who the salvage was. The knowledge paralysed his tongue against his palate.

The creature leaned in close. ‘I’ll tell you then, as long as you promise to keep it to yourself. You will, won’t you? Promise now. Go on. I know you’re frightened.’ The giant sniffed around Kiner’s head. ‘I can smell it.’

Tolly Kiner nodded, still in the same state of dumb terror.

‘I am Konrad Curze,’ the creature said, shuddering with release as he spoke his name. ‘The Night Haunter. Eighth primarch, gene-father of the Night Lords Legion Astartes.’ Idly, Curze closed his hand around Kiner’s neck, and lifted him off the ground until Kiner’s face was level with Curze’s own.

A wet sound came from Tolly Kiner, followed by the warm, round smell of voided bowels.

‘I see you’ve heard of me too. Well, that is satisfying.’ Curze leered horribly. ‘You know, I’ve been wondering something else. Do you know what that is?’ His freezing grip shifted around Tolly Kiner’s neck. Kiner began to cry.

‘I’ve been wondering what sort of noises you’re going to make when I peel you alive.’ He ran a sharp nail down Kiner’s chest, slicing the skin open. ‘Let’s find out, shall we?’

Overton glared at them all individually, sparing not one member of the crew or the passengers his angriest glower. Irsk and Kutskin, his biggest henchmen, flanked the captain, aping his ferocious expression though without the same conviction, acting the heavy when they were as craven and disloyal as the rest of the crew.

‘Someone’s been down here,’ Overton said. ‘Someone who did this.’ The captain pointed at the sarcophagus, still in the middle of the floor, now thawed of ice and streaming condensation down its sides, but – most pertinently – empty of its occupant.

They were all present, except Tolly Kiner. Kiner’s absence suggested he’d been the one to crack the coffin open, which lessened the suspicion on the rest, or so Endson gabbled into Elver’s ear. Elver half-listened to him, not believing his theory for a second. There was another possibility, namely that none of them had opened it, but the occupant had freed himself.

‘We’re off the hook, you and me,’ whispered Endson. ‘Once he catches who did it, that’ll be that for them. More payout for us, eh? We’re off the hook!’

Overton was still speaking. Elver wasn’t hearing him either. Endson’s babble and the captain’s accusations drifted in and out of his awareness like frequencies clashing on a badly tuned vox.

‘…the biggest pay day we’ve had since forever,’ Overton was saying. ‘So whoever did this, is going to own up to it, tell me why they broke the stasis seal and ruined our chances of earning big, and I might let you live until we get to port and you can find another ship to blight! Irsk, the slate.’

Irsk handed Overton a data-slate. The captain tapped upon its brass keys

and held up the screen for all to see.

The view was of the catch-bay. The sarcophagus, still full, flickered. The footage date stamp jumped several hours and, as if by a conjurer's trick, the sarcophagus was empty.

'Someone got into the central datastacks and erased this section of the vid,' Overton said. 'One of us. One,' he stressed, 'of *you.*'

Suspicious glances flew around the room. Chests puffed out. Solemn heads shook with adamant denial. More than a few knives were fingered. The crew were little better than pirates, Elver thought, ready to kill each other for a bit of coin. In fact, he told himself, they were worse than pirates, because they lacked the competence of corsairs. How mean and sordid a capsule world the *Sheldroon* really was. The passengers were quiet this time round, their excitement given way to worry. The mood was ugly.

'Nobody? Nobody?' said Overton. 'Right, then.' He jerked his chin in the direction of Elver. 'Let's see what the boy has to say.'

'What?' said Elver, suddenly paying full attention.

Irsk and Kutskin pushed their way through the group.

'I don't think he's done anything,' said Endson. 'He was in his–'

Air whooshed from Endson's lungs at a punch from Kutskin, who shoved him out of the way.

'Feed hole closed, Endson,' said Kutskin.

The crew drew back, leaving Elver exposed. Irsk nodded at his fellow thug. Kutskin grabbed Elver's arms and wrenched them behind his back. The occupants of the catch-bay shuffled further out of the way. A lot of them were excited by the promised violence, though a few had the decency to look away.

'You were a bit shaky, weren't you, Elver. You were a bit *perturbed.*' Irsk considered himself an intellectual, and over-enunciated words he thought clever. 'Why's that?'

'I don't know,' said Elver. 'I get these feelings sometimes. It was just a real bad one. I didn't open it. It scared me.'

Irsk grinned over his shoulder at Kutskin. 'Feelings, he says,' said Irsk, and drove his fist into Elver's gut. 'Wrong answer. Why did you let him out?'

Elver, bent double, coughed up a stream of spit. 'Why would I do that?'

'We're asking the questions, Elver.'

Idiot, thought Elver, before Irsk punched him again.

'Now tell us why you did it!'

'I didn't drakking do it!' Elver gasped back.

Irsk drew his fist up, circling it around in preparation for another strike. He was dancing about with bloodlust, warmed to his task.

The blow didn't land. The screams saw to that. A score of heads whipped up and around, seeking the source of the agony shrieking through the ship. It came from everywhere, up the corridor, through the ventilation system, even,

it seemed, resonating from the metal.

‘Tolly Kiner!’ said Teach.

The family of passengers covered their ears. The crew paled. Many men who claimed to be brave revealed themselves to be otherwise.

The noise lasted for two long minutes. Elver hadn’t known a man could scream that long without drawing breath. The noise was horrible, and froze them all.

When the last scream died, Overton took charge. ‘Irsk.’ He had to stop to steady his voice. ‘Kutskin, find out where that noise came from. Gravek, back to the bridge. Lock yourself in. Dendren, open the weapons lockers. Arm everyone aboard this ship.’

‘I think,’ said Elver, his hands rested on his knees, ‘that would be a very bad idea.’ He coughed out a rope of phlegm. ‘We should get out of here. Take our chance in the salvator pods and the docking shuttle.’

‘We’d never get anywhere! It’s two years to the nearest port,’ said Gravek. ‘We’d die in the void.’

The crew muttered to themselves, their voices building with fear and anger, until Overton was forced to shout.

‘Shut up! Shut up all of you! Elver, you shut up most,’ said Overton. He adjusted his belt and snapped open the press stud on his holster. ‘I’m captain. We’re going to hunt this bastard down. Nobody kills my crew on my ship and gets away with it.’

‘You don’t…’ gasped Elver. ‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ said Overton.

They really didn’t know.

SIX

TWO LORDS OF THE NIGHT

‘I killed them all,’ Curze said quietly. ‘I enjoyed it,’ he added obstinately. ‘They were all guilty anyway. I wonder, how many would have died by my hand had your Imperium lived up to your expectations? How many more men like that would I have killed, full of righteous loathing for their inferiority? That would have been just, don’t you think?’

His challenge went unanswered.

‘I wonder often if Corax would have followed me into this same darkness, had the war not come. He and I were so similar, we could have been twins. Of them all, he and Sanguinius were the closest to me – not personally, none of them were my *friends*,’ Curze said sarcastically. ‘There were never any friends for me. But they were the most alike, though for different reasons. Corax and I, yes, both creatures of darkness, I the murderer, he the assassin, both preoccupied by justice, both raised around criminals.’

He shivered sensuously, and drew black fingernails over his luminous flesh.

‘We followed similar paths. We should have had so much in common, and yet Corax always hated me. He thought I was barbaric, cruel. Him! The noble freedom fighter who incinerated untold thousands in atomic fire to secure his great moral victory. He understood the value of atrocity well enough, even if he pretended not to.’

Curze shook his head and laughed. ‘You see, that’s what I don’t understand. Why did you breed such a clutch of hypocrites?’

He wrapped long, bony arms around his knees, and pressed his face into them.

‘I’ll tell you something else,’ said Curze. ‘I hated him too. You might think I hated all my brothers. I didn’t. They were the ones that hated me. I could not hate them back. Most of them I could tolerate, a few I respected. A couple I loved, though they never returned the affection. But I hated Corax.’ He looked aside in shame and spoke to the wall. ‘I hated him so much.

‘I didn’t hate him for being like me, nor for being better, though if he and I were two aspects of the same principle, he was the better one. Everything

about us was so similar, to your design,' Curze said significantly. 'Was he not born into awful straits? Was he not victimised? Oppressed? But he did not murder like I did. He used passion and argument where I used blood. I hated myself for not being like him, but I couldn't despise someone for being what I was not. Why would I hate him for any of those things?' He looked back at the statue and cleared his throat theatrically. 'Was it that he failed like I did to fully tame his world, meekly handing it over to the Mechanicum? Did I hate him because he was weak?' He pressed his face hard into his updrawn knee. 'I couldn't hate him for that either.'

He sneered, gnawing at his skin until blood ran.

'I'll tell you why. Envy of his mastery lay behind my hatred. I haunted the night, but Corax owned it.' Breath hissed through dagger teeth. 'He *owned* it. My stupid, short-sighted sons thought the Ravens' abilities came from technology given only to the Nineteenth. I saw it was innate. Imagine what I could have done had you given the same gifts to me? How much more perfect a monster I would have been had the shadows loved me as much as they loved Corax!'

Choking clouds of flesh smoke rolled from every opening in the street, restricting vision to a handful of metres and hiding lumps of rockcrete that leapt out on helm-plate displays only when they were ready to snare the squad's feet.

Sevatar's visual feed was a mess of white, half-guessed outlines and uncertain target locks. He tuned his suit's autosenses up and down the spectrum, but every range was compromised. Rolling waves of electromagnetism let out by energy weapon strikes disrupted the highest frequencies, rendering radar and other devices reliant on regular wave patterning useless. In the lower ranges, all forms of visible and near-visible light were swallowed up by the oily smoke. Preysight was especially useless. When activated, blazing buildings turned the world into shifting columns of colour impossible to navigate. Only pulsed sound waves offered a way through, and they could not be trusted. The density of the environment and the thundering orbital bombardment sent false echoes back.

Sevatar's foot rang off a boulder of rockcrete fragments with a shuddering bang. He stumbled, kicking his way through a tangle of twisted rebar wrapped through the false stone. Fragments of the 'crete bounced across the road. He slowed, scanning billows of smoke and the swift glimpses of buildings he snatched from the murk.

Camen Manek didn't see Sevatar slow, and slammed hard into his powerpack, sending them both reeling.

Sevatar recovered first, grabbing hold of Manek's pauldron. Armour servos grunted as he twisted the trooper's shoulder, forcing the other into an ungainly lean.

‘Watch yourself,’ Sevatar said quietly, helm to helm, and shoved the Apothecary back.

‘I was born in the darkest pit of the sunless world, but it’s impossible to see anything in this!’ Manek growled. His eye lenses were red sparks in the rolling black smoke.

A triple shell burst-shocked the air. Whistling and sonic booms announced more ordnance incoming.

‘Try!’ snarled Sevatar. ‘Lord Curze is here somewhere.’ Manek backed off. Sevatar was not known for his empathy.

The rest of the command squad drew up with Sevatar and Manek as shells rained down.

‘Erasure zone four blocks away and closing,’ said Ashmenkai Vor, pointing back the way they had come. ‘They’re tracking over the city in our direction.’ He was too wise to call the First Captain’s plan out for idiocy, but put his concern into the tone of what he said.

‘Auspex,’ said Sevatar. His head didn’t stop moving, constantly searching for a clean way through the burning sector. A starship lance strike hit a few streets away, sending liquid ripples through the earth. Perturbed by the groundquake, a building collapsed with an all too human moan. Debris from its demise bounced from their armour.

‘That was close. This hunt is going to kill us all.’

‘Be quiet, Vor. We’re going back with Lord Curze or we’re not going back at all.’ The auspex sweep was taking too long. ‘Data, now!’ Sevatar demanded. The strain of losing their gene-father was evident in his voice. His warriors glanced at one another.

‘Sir, the auspex is little more use than our sensoriums. I require a little time.’ Gish Tovor was calm in the face of Sevatar’s anger.

‘Get me a lock on the primarch.’

‘This area is thick with biosigns, First Captain.’

‘Can anyone raise Shang?’ said Manek.

‘Why would we want to do that?’ asked Vor.

‘He’s the equerry. He should be where the primarch is,’ said Janka Fen, the final member of the group.

‘As much as it’s going to disappoint you all, I cannot raise Shang or anyone else,’ Tovor said. He looked skywards, where the smoke and steam raised by the bombardment flashed with destructive energies. ‘We are in the proverbial eye of the storm. Nothing is coming into this sector, and nothing is going out. They could drop a magma bomb on our heads, and nobody would be any the wiser what happened to us.’

‘Someone’s probably about to do that,’ said Vor.

Sevatar’s vox feed ran foul with the worst Nostraman curses.

‘This way,’ he said, pointing through the shifting veils of smoke towards a

building at the end of the street massive enough to defy the murk.

‘You have a location, sir?’ asked Tovor.

‘No,’ said Sevatar, setting off at a run. ‘But any direction is better than standing around with you imbeciles.’

The bombardment was creeping closer, and the squad rushed towards the building in their haste to remain ahead of it. There were a few pockets of resistance left in the city, and the squad did not have time to take the proper care. A single gunshot cracked from behind a broken column, answered by a dozen mass reactives from the running Night Lords’ guns that obliterated the stone and the man sheltering behind.

‘Brave,’ said Vor.

‘Stupid,’ said Manek.

There was no more resistance after that.

Every single window in the building had leapt from its frame and lay smashed on the ground around the frontage. Sevatar’s men crashed through the debris, their massive boots reducing glass shards to powder. The heavily decorated main doors had also been blasted out from inside. Three large pieces clung to the hinges. The rest had been turned to blackened shreds of bronze fanning out from the portal. Fire belched from windows a hundred stories above as the unit ran from the street into the grand entrance hall, now a precarious scrap pile full of broken wood and steel. Despite fires guttering in various places in the building, there was little smoke in there, a thin blue haze instead of the thick black plumes of incinerated flesh outside.

Sevatar had no data on what the building had been. There was an insufficient amount of it left to decide for himself. A direct lance hit had cored it from pinnacle to basement, gifting it with an atrium. Rooms once closed off now brazenly opened themselves to the air. The damage was impressively precise. The giant laser cannons hit deep and hard, but they were surgical tools. A large one might vaporise everything in a forty-metre diameter, but damage beyond this point was caused by direct heat and secondary shockwave. If the secondary effects were blunted somehow, it was not unknown for objects only metres away from the target point to survive unharmed. Floors hung ragged beams over the new gap. Liquid from broken pipes gathered soot from the walls and ran filthy black waterfalls down to ground level. Flames licked from burning furniture, and everywhere drifted sheets of paper swirling in the thermals, some ablaze, mingling with fat cinders of corpse ash.

Fen whistled. ‘Look at this place. Why are we doing this? This planet was ours already. Why has the Night Haunter come down here?’

Sevatar knew why. He didn’t say.

‘Who knows what the primarch’s will is. Perhaps he wishes to make himself a new domicile. Now it has been remodelled, this looks like the sort

of place Lord Curze might favour,' said Vor.

Tovor made himself busy with his auspex.

'Quiet,' said Sevatar. The squad irritated him. Curze was missing, at danger from his own fleet. An itch at the edge of his consciousness dragged his attention upwards through the ragged mess of the lance hit. It wasn't exactly chance that had brought them here. He didn't like to acknowledge his curse, let alone use it, but he saw little alternative to letting his latent powers guide them under the circumstances.

'Up,' he commanded. The others looked at each other when he gave no reason for his decision. Tovor glanced up from the screen mounted on the back of his arm.

'Sir? I have no reading.'

'Now!' Sevatar said.

Vor shrugged. 'You heard him,' he said. 'Up!' And he jogged towards the remains of the monumental stair. The rest followed after.

Sevatar led them out onto the fiftieth floor. Around a corner lay five dead legionaries.

'Bodies,' said Fen.

'Endless night, they're ours,' said Vor. He ran to the first. 'Ninety-sixth company, Twelfth Claw,' he said, reading the markings and notched runes decorating the armour plate. He looked closer. 'What by the… His armour!' said Vor. He maglocked his bolter to his leg and heaved the body over, revealing the true extent of the fallen legionary's injuries.

Manek joined him.

'He's been excruciated.' He squatted down beside the fallen legionary for a better look. Shattered chest armour exposed seeping viscera. The ceramite was obliterated, but the fused ribs had been carefully excised and the skin around peeled back with surgical precision.

Ashmenkai Vor shook his head. 'Mutilated. Who had the time for this?'

Manek played his narthecium over the dead warrior. 'His enhancements have been removed. His geneseed is gone.'

'There's another one over here,' said Tovor. 'Same Claw, same wounds.'

'Who would do that? The natives? What weapon do they have to crack battleplate?' said Vor. 'And why take the Emperor's gifts?'

'None,' said Manek. 'These wounds were inflicted by power blades, set in pairs, wide-spaced. Artificier lightning claws.'

'*Mercy*,' said Fen.

'And *Forgiveness*,' said Tovor.

'The primarch's weapons,' said Manek.

Vor got to his feet.

'Captain, is he here?' called Vor, his crackling voice crashing through the hush.

Sevatar did not answer, but pushed on for the back of the building, past the blackened shaft cored out by the lance hit.

Doors opened on a wrecked auditorium. The ceiling of the theatre was holed in many places, letting in colourless shafts of light heavy with motes of ash. A smashed stage occupied much of the front. Dusty chairs sat in rows on a shallow incline. Sevatar noted all this in an instant, faster even than his armour scanned and labelled it all for him in flickering columns of runes. But what hit him first was the smell – the spicy scent of spilled legionary blood, and innards scooped from their proper places.

Konrad Curze was at the epicentre of the slaughter.

‘My lord,’ said Sevatar.

Curze squatted upon a pile of wrecked transhuman flesh and shattered armour in the darkest part of the theatre, away from the slanting beams of light.

Curze turned to face his warriors. His chin was streaked with blood. Shreds of engineered organ flesh stuck between his teeth. He held a severed arm loosely in his hands.

‘Sevatar?’ said Curze. His brow wrinkled, and he blinked slowly. ‘Why are you here? It is dangerous. The bombardment.’ He waved the flopping limb up at the ceiling.

‘We have come for you,’ said Sevatar. ‘You are at risk.’

The Night Haunter shook his head, sending his unkempt black hair swinging to and fro. There had been a time near the beginning of the war when he adopted higher standards of personal hygiene, as befitted a lord of men. Lately he had returned to his old ways.

‘I am not at risk!’ said Curze. ‘You are the one at risk, coming here.’

‘I doubt you’d survive a lance hit yourself,’ said Sevatar gently. He approached his genesire. The others, unsure what to do, fanned out uneasily, looking for enemies and finding only shattered chairs and fallen drapes.

‘You found them,’ said Sevatar.

‘Your brothers here would not listen.’ Curze smiled sadly at Sevatar. ‘I have disciplined them.’

‘Sev,’ shouted Vor. ‘What is happening? These are ninety-sixth. They’re all new, aren’t they? Fresh recruits. What’s going on?’

‘Be quiet, Vor, this is not your concern,’ said Sevatar.

The primarch held the arm by its elbow, and poked a helm with it. The fingers curled in on themselves. ‘I’ll tell him, my good little son,’ said Curze sourly. ‘These warriors who came here in midnight clad exceeded their remit. They overreached their ambitions for slaughter.’

‘What does he mean, Sevatar?’

‘I said shut up, Vor!’ said Sevatar.

‘I won’t shut up. Our lord has killed his sons, our brothers!’

‘I have,’ said Curze. He looked in mild surprise at the severed arm held. ‘Yes. Why do we kill the way we do, Ashmenkai Vor? Why do we skin and torture? Why do we hurt those we would save?’

‘To strike fear,’ responded Vor. ‘Fear is the greatest of all weapons. Fear will cow a world when guns will not. We spill blood to save blood.’

Curze nodded. ‘That is so. What is the utility of terror?’

‘Terror is a clean blade. Its cut disarms opponents without doing them harm. Terror is the friend of compliance.’

‘You have my teachings well at heart. What of the innocents we must slaughter?’

Vor’s voice became hard. ‘The few must die in pain so the many can live in peace. Fear is the road to civilisation. It is paved with bone and washed with blood, but the destination forgives the sin of the journey.’

‘The ends justify the means.’ Curze sighed. He threw the arm aside. It landed with a soft, heavy thump. ‘These *men* did not agree with the sentiments you have spoken. They inflicted pain for the sport of it. They continued past the point of optimal terror. They slew to entertain themselves.’ He hunched lower. ‘A poor intake not worthy of the gifts given them.’

The bombing rumbled on outside.

‘Then the bombardment, it is to hide their crimes from the other Legions?’ said Manek.

‘You at least, Camen Manek, are blessed with a little brain,’ Curze said. ‘A city burns when it should not, all for the errors of these… *criminals*.’

‘We should return to the fleet, my lord. I promise to convene the Kyroptera at the first opportunity,’ said Sevatar. ‘We shall conduct a purge of inappropriate recruits.’

A grunt greeted Sevatar’s promise. ‘It will not help. It is too late for that now,’ said Curze. ‘The serpent has bitten. The poison is inside the body and begins its work. I have seen it.’

‘My lord…’

Curze silenced him with a gesture. His head came up, sniffing at the air like a hound.

‘We are no longer alone.’

Tovor’s auspex let out a single ping.

‘Weapons!’ commanded Sevatar. The command Claw brought up their bolters.

‘I am detecting battleplate power outputs all around us,’ said Tovor. ‘Multiple returns. Eight at least.’

‘I have clear biosign readings,’ said Manek. ‘By the walls. In the shadows.’

‘There’s nothing there!’ said Vor.

Shadows moved around the periphery of the auditorium. Uncertain target locks flickered over undulations in the dark. White outlines on red lens feeds

twisted awkwardly, attempting to find something that did not wish to be seen. The sensorium did better than Sevatar's eyes. He blinked, but his vision stubbornly refused to see what his armour told him was there.

A single Nostraman rune blinked steadily on Sevatar's helm display.

Threat.

'Draw in. Protect the primarch,' he commanded. He activated the magnetic binders on his bolter and slapped it to his thigh, and plucked his chainglaive from his back.

The command Claw fell back around their lord. Curze remained motionless, disinterested.

Bolts racked into chambers. The shadows ceased their movement.

'I have steady targets,' said Tovor. 'Sharing.'

The white outlines flickered on Sevatar's displays into the shapes of Space Marines in full war-plate. And yet he could not actually see them.

'Should we open fire?' said Vor, his voice thick with the desire to fight.

'Hold,' said Curze. 'Lower your weapons.'

Reluctantly, Sevatar's warriors obeyed.

The shadows rippled. Black armoured Space Marines detached themselves from puddles of darkness, like plastek sculptures rising from tar. Where only targeting data had been before, Sevatar now saw a full squad of XIX Legion veterans, materialising from darkness to fill the outlines painted by his cogitator. His eyes ached, begging him to tear off his winged helm and rub them. This could not be. Nostraman born could see into any shadow. The Ravens should not have been able to hide so completely, but they had.

Occupying a broad ledge that had housed statues, now broken on the ground, the Raven Guard had the higher position. Unlike the Night Lords, they had their weapons raised.

'You have us at a tactical disadvantage,' said Curze. 'I trust neither you nor my sons will do anything regrettable.' He looked at Sevatar. 'Am I right?'

'If they move, take them down,' said Sevatar. He held his glaive ready, his finger hovering over the activation stud.

None of the Raven Guard spoke. They left that to their lord.

Very little shocked Sevatar. Even for a Space Marine he was solid as stone, unmoved by the remnant emotions his brothers suffered so much from. But when Corvus Corax emerged from shadow far too shallow to accommodate him, he blinked in surprise. Nothing that big should have been able to materialise that way – his battleplate alone should have revealed him; every mark of power armour growled and thumped and whined with activity. Corax's did not. His armour ran silently, with no grinding joints, no teeth-itching hum. He appeared from nothing as noiselessly as oil running over water. Masters of fear and pitiless killers all, the Night Lords felt the unfamiliar pangs of disquiet.

‘Brother,’ said Corax. ‘I come to you without violent intent, but please, explain to me what is going on in this city.’ His voice was soft like the Night Haunter’s, though not as sibilant, and with a more measured tone. Sevatar refused to let it beguile him. The threat Corax made was clear enough.

Warsuit cogitators redrew the target outline around Corax, expanding it from the legionary it thought it had seen to the primarch he revealed himself to be. With an apologetic flourish, their sensorium aids graced the weak points of Corax’s sable armour with floating recommendations for targeting. The hum in Sevatar’s helm changed pitch as his war-plate reconsidered the primarch’s threat rating, appending a rune of high danger to Corax’s head. It flashed but did not change when Corax removed his helm. The warnings weren’t worth a damn. The primarch would be on them before their fingers could squeeze their triggers, even with the Night Haunter there. He looked between his father and his distant uncle, caught for an eternity upon the blade of choice. If he acted first, he would probably die. If Corax had violent intentions towards Curze and made the first move, then he’d *definitely* die.

The vox clicked. Vor’s voice breathed private uncertainty into his ears.

‘Sev, what do we do? These bastards have the drop on us. If…’

The First Captain cut him off. ‘Do not think it. Certainly do not say it. Wait.’

Sevatar had never met the Ravenlord, only seen him from a distance, and he had never seen the Night Haunter and Corax side by side. It was said they were brothers cast in the same mould, and truly the similarities between them were astonishing. Their skin shared death’s pallor. Their eyes were sinister orbs of ink, the Lord of Ravens’ completely black, the Lord of Murder’s barely less so, only a touch of white either side of his enlarged pupils. Both carried talons of steel. Both evoked winged creatures of darkness: one chiropteran, the other avian. Both were masters of the dark. Their facial features were markedly fraternal, long thin noses, narrow faces, high cheek bones, sharp chins, jet black hair.

The differences were starker for the similarities. Curze was filthy and stank of blood; Corax was clean, his armour polished. But it was in their expressions that they diverged the most. Corvus Corax bore a perpetual light frown, and an expression of such utmost seriousness it strayed into caricature. Curze’s face changed constantly, small tics transforming it from arch knowingness to wild-eyed threat, signs of the incipient madness that, even then, Sevatar was becoming aware of.

The possibility of violence turned the air to glass which any sudden movement might shatter. Two lords of men, one midnight clad, the other armoured in shadow, stared at one another. Distant rumbling sent dying tremors through the building as the bombardment moved on to other districts.

Corax broke the silence first. ‘What is the meaning of this, my brother?’ he

said, gesturing metre-long claws at the mess of the slain. ‘What happened to your warriors?’

Unable to help himself, the Night Haunter snarled. He caught it and turned it into a mocking smile, but not before all present had seen his anger. He was a predator challenged by something just as dangerous. For a moment, Konrad Curze exhibited weakness.

‘I happened to them,’ said Curze evenly.

Corax looked over the ruined flesh in the room in disbelief. ‘What have you done?’

Curze smiled blackly. ‘An internal dispute, Lord Corax,’ he said airily. ‘A Legion matter, that I have resolved. You must understand, there are many criminals in your Legion also. You have your ways of dealing with those who stray too far from the bounds of good conduct.’ He poked a blade of *Mercy* through the shattered eye lens of a helm and held it up for Corax to see. ‘This is mine.’

Corax’s eyes lingered on the blood staining Curze’s chin.

‘Then perhaps you could tell me why you are bombarding this already compliant sector?’

‘This Ravenlord has fought most of his brothers. Let our lord teach him a lesson,’ Vor voxed Sevatar. *‘I say we fight!’*

‘Do not open fire!’ Sevatar ordered.

The muted clicks of the Ravens’ voxes intruded on their frequency, a sure sign the Ravens were also communing with each another. From their stance, he guessed their conversation was going the same way.

Curze shifted his weight imperceptibly. Corax reacted in kind. His fingers twitched a fraction of a millimetre. The pair of them appeared at ease, but they were a hair’s breadth from striking.

Don’t, Curze, thought Sevatar. *Don’t fight him.*

Curze’s narrowed eyes crinkled with a smile. A little tension bled from the room. ‘We are the weapon of fear no other Legion dared to be. We are the glorious Eighth. You think I am a monster. I am a simple tool, like you. We have different uses, though identical edges.’

‘I do not think anything about you,’ said Corax. ‘Other than the disgust I feel for your methods.’

Curze shrugged. ‘You may join the line of all the others who feel the same. I don’t care. I am exactly as the Emperor intended me to be. Are you really any better than I, Corax shadow-skulker? The Eighth are open in our murders. The Nineteenth are assassins. We are all killers. We are brothers in method as well as in blood.’

‘Our way of war is clean,’ said Corax. Sevatar found his voice annoyingly lugubrious. Such misery. They said he was raised in a prison, and that accounted for his saturnine demeanour. Sevatar wanted to hurl him into the

deeps of Nostramo's hives, so he might better learn what lawlessness was. The primarchs were preening fools, self-obsessed, unable to see the truth for their own, aggrandised woes. Curze was lonely in being true to himself. He was a fiend, but at least he was honest.

'No war is clean. All of them come with a price,' Curze continued. 'Some are more obvious than others, that is all, and the price must always be paid.' Curze sighed, shrinking into himself, bored. 'War's reckoning awaits you. Do you wish to know the cost?'

Corax's black, unreadable eyes rested on Curze for several seconds. 'I will return to my ship. Stop this bombardment. The conquest is falling behind schedule. We risk turning the population further from the Emperor's light.'

'I think you'll find them most pliable when I am done,' said Curze. He turned his attention back to the broken helmet. He was done with the conversation.

An unseen command passed between Corax and his warriors. Still covering the Night Lords, they retreated from the auditorium.

When they were gone, a chime in Sevatar's helm signified that Corvus Corax wished to speak to him directly.

'First Captain,' that silky, miserable voice said. *'Does he believe it to be true, that your Legion is a weapon of fear?'*

'He does.'

'Do you believe it?'

Sevatar did not reply.

'I say many of the other Legions see you as a coterie of sadists and murderers,' said Corax. His voice was totally isolated from outside noise, and spoke eerily into Sevatar's helm. *'So I ask you again, do you believe it?'*

'My Lord Curze,' Sevatar said stiffly, and severed the vox. 'My lord Night Haunter, what are your orders?' Sevatar asked the question as neutrally as he could, belying his concern that the answer might result in a command to hunt down their allies.

'Let them go,' said Curze sadly. 'Now is not the time for us to kill our brethren.'

Cold, dark dread rose through the choked channels of Sevatar's mind at those words. He stamped it flat, but not before unease threaded his veins with ice. A headache pulsed behind his left eye, making the lid twitch. He was grateful his face was hidden by his helmet.

Curze grinned at the First Captain suddenly, transforming his visage into a death's head rictus lit by febrile eyes.

'Now you have met my brother, you must surely prefer crows to ravens.'

That was a joke, thought Sevatar. He did not understand jokes. 'My lord, are we finished?'

For some unfathomable reason, that made Curze cringe, and he nodded like

a rebuked child. His sons wavered in their adoration, then Curze gathered his dignity and his wits. Standing from the pile of the dead, he clothed himself in a primarch's majesty, obliterating memories of the pitiful, cannibal thing he had been a few moments before.

'We return,' he said, his voice rich with power, steady as his brother's had been. Sevatar let out a relieved breath that his father showed them this side of himself.

'I shall arrange a teleport back to the *Nightfall*.' Sevatar dismissed the others. They reluctantly departed the theatre. Sevatar hesitated. 'My lord, you said now is not the time to kill our brothers.'

'I did?' said Curze distractedly. He was examining the auditorium, as if seeing it as it was before, unmarked by war and the blood of his sons.

Sevatar thought carefully before continuing, but caution had never been his strongest attribute.

'The phrasing you employed suggested to me that you have foreseen bloodshed. Is that the case?'

Curze stared at him, the black buttons of his depthless eyes threatening to swallow the First Captain whole.

'Will there come such a time?' persisted Sevatar.

'I can tell you how you die, if you wish,' said Curze softly, grave as a corpse-choked battlefield from whence all the glory has fled. 'Do you want to know? It is far, far away from here, in the endless dark.'

'No,' said Sevatar firmly. 'I do not want to know.'

'Then never ask me questions like that again, Sev,' said Curze. 'Your question and mine are different, but you will like the answer to neither much.'

Curze licked the blood from his already healing knee, lost in memory.

'Corax affronted me, ordering me about like that. When the call came for the Eighth Legion to terrorise the Carinaen Sodality into submission, I arranged to be elsewhere,' he told the flesh sculpture. 'I foresaw the event, and what would occur there when I was too far away to assist, and how poorly Corax's failure while acting in my stead would reflect on him. I assume he learned his lesson. He was not so different to me. He espoused justice. He and Guilliman could fill a room with prattle about the law. Neither of them understood that laws are a modest cloak for feeble morality, a half effort. Justice has no morals. It must be a bloody undertaking.'

Curze smiled to himself, amused by the memory.

'So righteous. So foolish. Corax wished for justice, but never understood how to ensure it.' Curze sniffed. 'Yet another of your failures.'

He sniffed again, then scrubbed hard at his nose with the back of his wrist. Flecks of dried blood speckled his arm.

'The corruption had taken root in the Night Lords by then. I was aware that the Legion was no longer mine. Criminals on Nostramo were providing poor

stock, emptying their prisons, passing them off to bribed recruit masters as the finest individuals. Your great dream undermined by money. Fate was set. Soon the cries of brother slaying brother that troubled my waking moments would become visions of the end, where your precious Horus turned and spat on all you held dear. Your hubris echoed loudly down time, father, loudly enough for me to see and hear it, but not loudly enough to convince the others. Not at all. Once more, I spoke truth. I tried to tell Fulgrim. I tried to warn Dorn. Again, I was called a *monster*.'

His eyes unfocused, and he sat silent for a long time, his jaw working rotten teeth on rotten teeth, so they wobbled in their gums and blood-threaded drool tracked down his chin.

He did not notice.

'I had a pet for a while,' he said, apropos of nothing.

SEVEN

THE FOURTH PASSENGER

In the beginning, there was muzzle flash and the snap of weak las-beams heat-shocking the air. There were shouts of triumph when their prey was sighted and pursuit was given, but they did not last long. Screams took the place of all else, until they too dwindled to long, tense silences, stirred up again to symphonies of agony when the creature found one of the *Sheldroon*'s last crew members. By that point in the slaughter the few remaining had gone to ground, hoping against all evidence to the contrary that the creature would overlook them.

It had been some days since the last of the primarch's victims gave out its final bubbling, sobbing moans. Elver reckoned he was among the last alive, perhaps *the* last. Currently he was holed up in a nameless, numberless ventilation tube far from the principal areas of the ship. It was bizarre, he reflected as he spooned unidentifiable slop from a ration tin into his mouth, that he'd learned his way around the *Sheldroon* as boy solely to avoid Overton's violent outbursts, and that it was only that knowledge, bought at such hideous cost, that was keeping him alive now.

He was too thoroughly pissed off to feel even slightly thankful to the captain.

'Whatever, I'm alive. All the rest are dead,' he whispered to himself insistently. He was talking to himself more and more. Dangerous, obviously – who knew how well the cadaverous being they'd dragged aboard could hear – but he couldn't help himself. Talking kept the gnawing dread at bay.

'Alive,' he repeated. He frowned at the ration tin's emptiness. 'Not much comfort,' he said. He tossed the tin aside, shuddering at the quiet clank it made against the wall. 'I shouldn't have done that,' he said. At first he'd gathered up his rubbish meticulously, to hide all traces of his trail. After not very long it had struck him as pointless, and he'd given up. The thing was going to get him, no matter what he did. It was a primarch. A *primarch*! He had the gut-clenching feeling it was playing with him. In light of that, his littering was a small defiance. Let it come. Let this be over with.

'I don't believe that,' he told himself sternly. 'I don't want to die.'

His brief outburst done, he slumped. The business of surviving for the next five minutes pressed. It was surprisingly tedious, hours of creeping about and peeking round corners, salted by seconds of nauseating terror. He glanced both ways down the tube.

‘To the prow,’ he said, though the word was barely applicable to the *Sheldroon*’s blunt, void-corroded snout.

At a crouch, he could traverse the conduits at a fair pace, whereas the monster would have to worm its way along. Primarch or not, that would cost it time, and he’d be able to see it coming. Keep to the small places where it would struggle to go, that was the key. Keep out of its way.

Freezing cold emanated from ahead. He slowed, tentatively probing the thin metal of the duct. Blisters covered one palm where he’d been less than cautious before. The crew must have vented parts of the vessel in an attempt to blast the primarch into space. Fair enough – it’s what he would have done, had he not been hiding – but it did make his job harder. He kept his bare skin off the metal and risked picking up speed to get clear, wincing at every echoing thud his footsteps made.

He’d gone a little further when a moaning screech shuddered through the hull. He stopped, prey still. Elver wasn’t a hundred per cent sure which, but it was certainly one of the ship’s systems giving out. Without the minimal oversight of Overton’s crew, things were beginning to go wrong. Judging by the erratic gusting of the atmospheric cyclers, the life support was already dying, and once that went, so would Elver. When the ship’s thermal regulators failed, the cold would cease to be a problem; rather, it would be heat that killed him. Insulated by the void’s vacuum, and without being actively vented, heat from the reactor would build up in the *Sheldroon* until Elver died. It would then continue to get hotter and hotter, until it became too hot for the machines and they died too, and then, when the ship was floating unmanned and unpowered through the void, heat would slowly radiate away, and the *Sheldroon* would become cold as the void, though it would take a long while for that to happen. What was certain was that Elver wouldn’t be around to experience it.

The duct rounded a corner, whereupon Elver came to an angry, swearing stop.

A few centimetres from his nose, the duct had been crushed up into nothing by an impact from below. Elver squinted at it a moment, seeing a familiar pattern in the metal but not quite recognising it, until the detail leapt out at him. Impressed into the sheet steel was a human face, mouth open in a scream.

‘Balls,’ said Elver. He backed up. There was a service hatch a little way behind, to which he made his way back. When he got to the hazard-striped locking mechanism, he spent five minutes stock still, staring at the handle,

aware with painful clarity that twisting it could see his short life terminated.

Spitting an extreme oath of a kind that would earn him a death sentence on more conservative worlds, he suddenly flipped the release, opened the plex-glass panel over the lever, and grasped it.

‘Here we go,’ he said, and twisted. He cringed, eyes shut tight, as the access hatch flapped down into the corridor below, where it swung loudly on squeaking hinges.

Nothing happened.

He opened one eye, then the other; only then did his body uncurl.

Air wafted up from the black; stale, but breathable. He put out his head. There was nothing and no one in the corridor.

Elver dropped down softly after satisfying himself the corridor was empty. It evidently was not. He reached up to pull his sack full of ration tins out of the air conduit. When he looked back down, he found himself staring into the barrel of a pistol.

‘If you want to survive a little while longer,’ said the fourth passenger, ‘I would say absolutely nothing at all.’

Thick pipes gurgled loudly all around them. The corridor was not so much a dedicated space for people to use, but a place that lacked pipes. *The pipes resent the void in their middle,* Elver thought. *They don’t like us being here.*

‘What by the Throne of the beloved Emperor is going on?’ he shouted. One of the pipes, thicker through than he was, rumbled, shook, and gave out a tremendous knocking.

‘There were words about being quiet, weren’t there?’ the fourth passenger said, at a volume that suggested he wasn’t too bothered if Elver heard him or not. ‘The question is rhetorical, by the way. I have perfect recall. See it as a friendly hint,’ he looked pointedly over his shoulder at this juncture, ‘to shut up.’

The fourth passenger had… changed. ‘Change’ was exactly what had happened, but so unadorned a word did not capture the magnitude of his transformation, it being both subtle and extreme. The fourth passenger was definitely the same man – his facial features remained as they were – only with all vestiges of age and feebleness stripped away. His brocade robes had been discarded. Now the man wore some sort of close-fitting, all black body armour covered in pouches. He’d probably had it on the whole time, Elver thought, under his clothes.

Whereas before Elver had taken him to be some kind of low ranking adept of advancing years, an archivist, or tutor or something else bookish, the man leading him through the ship was young and hawkish in his mannerisms. He exuded such a high level of threat that Elver’s teeth and bladder ached with his urge to run away. The man the fourth passenger had been before, on the other hand, Elver would not have spared a second glance for. He supposed

that was entirely the idea.

‘Who are you exactly?’ Elver demanded.

The man turned round so fast Elver didn’t have time to blink. His hand was around Elver’s throat and one of his strange pistols under Elver’s jaw.

‘Silence, *please*,’ said the fourth passenger. He had a bland, killer’s voice.

‘At least tell me something!’ said Elver with a courage that surprised him. ‘I’m going to die anyway, what does it matter?’

The fourth passenger scowled. The pistol was removed. Elver found himself gasping for air through a bruised throat, without being sure exactly when he had been released. Throne, the man was as strong as he was fast.

‘I work for an organisation of high responsibilities and higher secrecy,’ he said. ‘My duty is to the Emperor, as is yours. That is all you need to know, and all I am going to tell you. If we are careful, we may achieve something remarkable.’

‘Like survive?’ said Elver hopefully.

‘Not that remarkable,’ said the man, pushing on ahead towards a hall thundering with energetic machines.

‘Oh.’

‘You’ll live a little longer,’ said the man. ‘And when the time comes to die, be thankful for the Emperor’s mercy that I’ll not let you suffer.’

Elver did not find that even slightly comforting.

‘Do you at least have a name?’ said Elver, shouting again as they entered the hall. ‘My name’s Elver,’ he added encouragingly.

The man took in their surroundings. There was nothing wasted in his movements. He wasn’t simply looking around, he was looking for something specific. They were in the enginarium section, at the point where everything was taken up by giant devices cocooned in networks of companionways. Together, the walkways and machinery filled the ship side to side and top to bottom. In the tight space between machines and the hull was a network of pipes way beyond Elver’s understanding. Overton paid scum-grade machine adepts to go over the ship every few years or so. Nobody on board really had an idea how any of the devices worked, trusting to prayer as much as maintenance to keep the *Sheldroon* going. It was all in a state of disrepair. The companionways swayed to the beat of the ship’s mechanical heart. Sections sagged dangerously. Rust streaked the walls, ate holes in the floor, and whatever colours the machinery had originally been painted, they were now the same, uniform oxide-and-grease brown.

‘You can call me Gun,’ the fourth passenger said.

‘Is that your actual name?’ asked Elver. Gun ducked under twisting shafts blurred with speed. Elver approached them with a degree more trepidation.

‘Of course not,’ said Gun. He tapped one of the pistols slung at his side. ‘But I do have guns,’ he reminded Elver. ‘Are you familiar with these

sections? None of this is standard.’

‘The ship’s a couple of thousand years old, so I’ve been told,’ said Elver. ‘I doubt any part of it has been standard for centuries.’

Gun nodded in agreement. ‘You survived longer than any of the others. You must know your way around.’

‘There’s not much else to do here, other than explore,’ he said lamely.

‘I’ll take that as a yes. Is there an external access airlock near here?’

Elver pointed upwards, to the top of a gantry holding a throbbing plasma sink. ‘Up there. A maintenance port. I don’t know if it works.’

‘It’ll do for a start,’ said Gun. ‘I assume you know the fastest way there?’

‘Yes,’ said Elver.

‘Then lead on.’

‘That way,’ said Elver, pointing further ahead. ‘We can’t climb by the sink, it’s too hot.’ It felt good to have a purpose again. ‘That’ll take us up to the first landing, then we can cross there and go–’

‘I said lead on, not prattle on.’ Gun had one of his guns in his hand again. ‘I am giving you orders, by the way, in case either of us is in doubt about the nature of our relationship.’

As they were climbing a rickety ladder, Elver put his hand in something sticky. Oil leaked from a multiplicity of sources in the machine hall, so he only recognised it as blood when he wiped sweat from his face with the back of his hand and saw the clotted traces of vitae smeared over his fingers.

‘Blood!’ said Elver, holding up his hand.

‘Keep climbing,’ said Gun.

Elver looked upwards. Now he was aware of it, he saw there were streaks of blood everywhere, colouring the oxidised steel a darker red. The amount grew as they ascended, becoming so prevalent that Elver couldn’t help putting his hands into it no matter how hard he tried. That was upsetting, but nowhere near as upsetting as the source.

He clambered onto a solid platform near the upper hull, and was promptly, violently sick.

Passengers one, two and three were arranged around the central column in gory tableau. Elver had only the most fleeting glimpse, but that was plenty of time for the image to burn itself into his soul forevermore.

The family comprised a minor official, his wife, and their nearly adult daughter. He couldn’t tell which had been which from what was left. Two of them were shackled to the central support by metal bent into place around their wrists and ankles. They were naked of clothes and skin. Their tongueless, disarticulated jaws hung from tormented sinews onto their chests. Bloody sockets stared sightlessly at the third figure crucified opposite them upon twisted spikes of wire. It too, had been skinned. In this case the jaw mandible had been carefully removed, leaving the tongue to hang from its

roots onto its neck. All of this, and the sickening smell that clung to Elver's clothes for days afterwards, was rendered all the more horrifying by one small yet telling detail. The crucified figure's eyes, peeled lidless with the removal of his face, remained in its skull. Just seeing that told Elver that he, for it must have been the father, had been forced to watch the others die.

Gun was unaffected by the sight, and investigated the scene with grave curiosity.

'He really is as mad as they say,' said Gun.

'Nobody sane would do this,' agreed Elver.

'They would,' said Gun. 'I have seen the same done, and worse, to further the survival of the Imperium. What is insane is not what was done, but *why*. This butchery is an indulgence. It serves no purpose. The monstrous can be justifiable, but if it cannot be righteous, then it is merely monstrous.'

'You're a monster too, then.'

Gun looked down at the shaking Elver. 'Not as big as the monster I am hunting. Konrad Curze, eighth primarch, once the Emperor's favoured weapon of terror.' Gun seemed to relish the mythical heft of the name, pronouncing it with respect.

'You're hunting it?' Elver said, careful not to look at Gun in case he saw the horror behind him again. 'Seriously?'

'He's hunting us too,' admitted Gun. 'And he'll kill us. Don't be too concerned. I'll shoot you once our task is done, and spare you this.'

'Thanks,' said Elver in a small voice. 'Can you kill him?'

'No,' said Gun. 'But there are others that can. First, they have to find him. I've been scouring these back lanes through the void for years now, and others like me have too, looking for him in a widening net around his Legion's old lair at Tsagualsa. There's a fortress there, never finished. It's as good a place as any to look for him. Mathematically speaking, the chances are that he would never be found, but the universe doesn't work quite like that. He's too big a loose end to remain untied. It is an honour to be the one to sight our quarry. I shall die knowing the Emperor's judgement is coming for him.'

'We sighted him,' said Elver. It sounded peevish, but it needed to be said.

Gun laughed. 'Really? Only after I had modified this hulk's sensorium. I led you here.'

'You're responsible for this!' said Elver. He shook harder. He was going to be sick again.

'I am responsible for your otherwise insignificant life being spent in the furtherance of the highest cause, the survival of our species.'

'I'm not going to thank you.'

'I don't expect you to,' said Gun. 'Come on. According to your directions we must pass through this mess here.' With frightening strength, he hauled Elver up to his feet. 'They're all dead, their suffering is over. They can't help

or harm you.’

Elver trembled with a dying man’s palsy as he raised his eyes to the bodies again. Irritation at Gun for treating him with such condescension needled him. He was a chartist, not some superstitious worlder to be scared of corpses.

He wasn’t scared of them, he was scared of what had made them dead.

EIGHT

NIGHT HAUNTER

Gun placed a fifth orb into the maintenance airlock. Rusty and battered like the rest of the hall's machinery, the airlock was large enough to admit one man in void gear at a tight squeeze. A pane of armourglass made misty by centuries of micrometeor impacts smeared the light of the stars. Elver had a desire to push past Gun and cast himself into the peace outside. That way, he was guaranteed a clean death, on his own terms.

It remained a fantasy. He did not move. While his heart beat, he could not voluntarily end himself. Whether this made him brave or a coward was open to question.

In the shabby closet of the airlock, Gun's devices looked like something rescued from a higher age: sleek, black orbs bisected with a single silver trench running around the diameter. Each was no bigger than a child's clenched fist. Gun undid the sixth pouch at his waist. The entire front and top undid, coming down to reveal a final orb nestled in protective foam.

'Psy beacons,' he said, taking out the orb. With a sharp twist, he rotated the halves in opposite directions. Something within broke, and a sickening sensation emanated from it, intensifying that already coming from the others.

He placed the orb with the rest, carefully mag-locking it in place so they were in two rows of three on the floor, and came back out of the airlock. A hidden tide pulsed from them, making Elver's head spin. He groaned, and stepped back.

Gun looked at Elver in a way Elver would really rather he didn't.

'Interesting,' said Gun. 'Are you a psyker?' he asked. His hands rested meaningfully on the butts of his pistols.

'A witch?' said Elver. 'No, I'm not!'

'You're lying. You are psy-touched, or else the orbs would have no effect on you.' Gun inclined his head back towards the chamber. Without taking his eyes from Elver, he depressed the door controls, and the airlock slammed shut hard, sending out an iron clang through the thunderous machinery. 'The orbs contain, in isolated halves, the powdered essence of an astropath, and that of a pariah. When the seal is broken, their ashes mingle, emitting a glow in the

warp that burns for weeks, easy to find, provided one is looking for them. My temple will follow it, and send a mistress here to deal with the Emperor's wayward son. Their emanations are affecting you. What are you? A minor telekine? A pyrokine? Empath machina?' Somehow, Gun's pistols had found their way into his hands. 'Small gifts of telepathy? Foresight?'

Most of those words Elver had rarely heard, and they struck him with fear, for to bear such a designation was a mark of death.

Despite the screening effect of the airlock door, Elver suffered the effects of the growing pulse thrumming from the orbs. His knees weakened. When he backed away from Gun, he half sank to the floor. His legs would not support him. Drool sheeted from his mouth.

'I dream,' he said.

'Everyone dreams,' said Gun.

'Yeah, but sometimes, mine come true.' Elver looked up pleadingly. 'That's all, I swear!' He took another feeble step back.

'How did you avoid the Black Ships?'

'I'm a chartist. Voidborn. I never told anyone,' he said. 'And nobody ever asked.'

The airlock cycler lumen clicked to green, ready for fans to huff out the air. Gun moved his finger along to the next button, whose light was still red, and depressed it.

A rough machine voice spoke from the wall. 'Warning. Airlock purge imminent. Depress button second time to confirm.'

Gun pressed the button again.

The outer door opened with a muffled thump.

'Purge complete.'

The nauseating sensation vanished as the lock contents spilled out into the void. Elver groaned. His secret was out.

'What will you do with me?'

Gun raised his pistol. 'I am no witch hunter,' he said. 'That is not my role. And remember, I was going to kill you anyway. I am curious, that is all. Curiosity has always been a fault of mine. Prepare to meet the Emperor.'

Elver held up his hands. 'Please, no! I don't want to die. Not here, not now, not ever!'

'Everything dies,' said Gun. 'Trust me, if he finds you, you'll wish you'd never been born.'

An inhuman howl sounded at the machine hall entrance, loud enough to penetrate the rattling of poorly maintained machinery, distracting Gun.

Elver took his chance. He threw himself from the edge of the companionway. His leap carried him dangerously close to a clattering array of pistons. Flailing, he grabbed the rail of another walkway, narrowly avoiding being sucked into the machines as he hauled himself up. The leap had seemed

easy enough in principle, but he had never done anything like that before, and the effort wrenched his arms hard.

A second bestial cry resounded around the chamber, turning at the end to a maniacal cackle.

A black flash cracked into the housing of the engine next to Elver, punching a hole edged with hot, cherry red through the metal. Elver yelped and ran around the sides, sprinting he knew not where, provided it was away from Gun.

‘He is here!’ Gun called after Elver. ‘You will regret declining my offer, once he finds you.’

Elver thought he’d deal with that later.

Something huge was coming up into the network of walkways and pipes, setting them all shaking. Elver slowed, and stopped, gripped by a need to see the monster that had slaughtered his crew. Against every instinct screaming in his skull, he turned back.

Konrad Curze stood upon a wide platform suspended in the centre of the hall. The primarch had added untanned manskins torn from Elver’s crewmates to his tattered robe. Blood, some of it dried brown, some of it still crimson fresh, slicked his marble skin. Elver had thought Curze awe inspiring before – now, seeing him out of stasis, Elver’s mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. He was the ultimate expression of humanity, taken to the apex of perfection, then cruelly corrupted. His musculature was flawless, sculptured, beautiful. His posture was that of a crone.

Gun dropped down in front of him, landing silently.

‘Hello, your highness,’ he said.

‘You waste yourself,’ Curze said, with a voice like a basket of snakes. ‘My end is not ordained for today.’

Gun bowed. ‘You’ll forgive me for trying, then,’ he said, and went into action.

Curze lunged at Gun. His movements lacked fluidity, being a series of violent jerks that nevertheless granted him immense speed. He held his hands ahead of him like claws. They were the reddest part of him, washed with innocents’ blood. When Gun flipped out of the way and Curze’s hands hit metal, the primarch’s fingernails tore bright wounds through the rusty patina.

Elver could not conceive of fighting such a thing, but Gun tried; more than that, as Elver watched he began to think the operative might conceivably win. He vaulted with smooth precision, using the pipes and beams of the hall as if he were in a gymnasium. He fired as he flipped. Streaks of silent black unlight speared from his twin pistols, strangely flat in appearance, as if painted on the skin of reality rather than inhabiting the normal three dimensions. Curze lunged and raked at Gun with incredible speed, but the operative was so very fast, and evaded every blow. A bolt from his gun

speared the primarch's shoulder, bringing forth a bone-chilling howl from Curze's ruined mouth.

'You are not the one,' said the monster. 'You are not the one who will slay me. Now is not my time. The lesson is yet to be given!'

'Why are the worst villains always the most talkative?' said Gun, loosing off a four burst shot from his weaponry.

'How irritatingly trite,' said Curze, evading Gun's shots. 'I was raised on a world of murderous poets. This tongue of yours is lacking in beauty, so emblematic of all touched by my father.'

Curze leapt, a stretching shadow that moved a distance just within the bounds of possibility. Gun struggled to dodge, weaving under Curze's outstretched talons. He could not avoid the next strike.

Their battle came to a crashing end. Curze jabbed with his left hand, ramming his splayed fingers through Gun's midriff. The polyplastek of the operative's bodysuit split like grape skin, and black talons, preceded by a spray of arterial red, burst from his back. His stomach was utterly ruined. Only his spine held the two halves of his body together, only Curze's palm, cupped in Gun's innards, held his guts in place.

Curze lifted Gun up to his face. The operative's attempts to speak resulted in a wet gurgle and a cataract of dark blood pouring from his mouth. One of his pistols fell from a limp hand. The other he tried to raise and fire, but he managed to lift it only a short way before it, too, fell.

'Vindication,' said the Night Haunter. 'That will be the subject of my final words, but they will not be spoken, not yet, and not to you. I tell you for your comfort and to emphasise, after all your long training and servitude to my father, there will be no vindication for you.'

Curze turned his right hand thumb down, wrapped his massive fingers around Gun's left shoulder, and with a twisting shove, tore the operative in half. Gun's legs dropped upon a rope of glistening intestine. The upper torso thumped down, head lolling, Gun's final expression was one of unprofessional surprise. Curze shook viscera from his hands, and looked directly at Elver.

'You, pathetic mortal,' Curze hissed. 'You may come down here, and I will not slay you, or you may run, so I can hunt you down and you may experience a death of terrible, prolonged agonies. I am weary of hunting. Unlike this assassin's slave, who would have killed you out of hand, I give you genuine choice.'

Elver gaped at the blood soaked wraith, dithered, then fled.

He got no more than a few metres before the primarch reared before him and swatted him down. His vision swam as Curze leaned forwards, filling his world with a moon pale face.

'Why do you mortals always run?' said Curze. A gust of rancid breath

chased Elver into the black.

It was the last Elver saw, for a while.

Elver awoke chained to Overton's command throne. The bridge was freezing, barely lit, the chilled metal of his restraints gnawing at his skin with blunt iron teeth. He shook uncontrollably. All parts of him were deathly cold but for a hot, angry throbbing in his left hand. He looked at it, afraid of what he might see, and was justified in being so, finding filthy bandages wrapped around the place his two smallest fingers should be. Blood, *his own blood,* was frozen to the throne arm in brilliant red icicles.

That was too much. Pressure built deep in his gut, erupting from his throat in a shrill scream that would do credit to a dying animal. For a whole minute he screamed, thrashing against the chains vainly until, shaking and breathless, he calmed, and forced himself to stop his racket.

'Breathe, Elver, breathe. You're not dead yet,' he whispered to himself.

He forced his attention from his bonds and the dreadful wound, out past his feet. His eyes wouldn't focus, until he bullied them into doing so. First things first. Was he alone? It appeared he was, apart from the frozen, dismembered remains of some of the crew frost-glued to the bridge floor, and the walls, and the ceiling, the equipment and…

'Don't look,' he said. 'Don't look.' He screwed his eyes tight and took deep breaths until his heart slowed to something approaching normal, and his chest ceased to shudder.

He checked himself over. The chains on his wrists were long enough to allow him to pat himself down. Other than his missing fingers, he seemed whole, and compared to the appalling injuries on the bodies in the bridge with him, he supposed he should be thankful. Once he'd discovered all his other parts were where they should be, he tried to free himself again, only in a more focused manner than before, tugging at the chains and pulling himself forwards as far as he could. He found no give in his restraints, so he closed his eyes again and muttered out something close to a prayer. They said the Emperor protects. Now would be a fine time to find out that was true.

'I hear some of the Emperor's cattle are worshipping my father as a god,' said a hissing, growling voice behind the throne. 'How magnificently hilarious.'

Elver didn't want to look. His eyes disobeyed him, sliding around, pulling his head after them, then his shoulders, until he was craning his neck as far as he could. How he had not noticed the primarch in there with him was beyond belief. He was so huge, possessed of such presence, and the smell coming off him… Worse than death. Worse than the ship's sumps and bilges. Elver's brain rebelled against the sight of Curze, hunched in the dark, occupying far more space than even his inhuman bulk should fill. He was larger than the shadows and as big as the night. All Elver's attempts to rally his spirits

collapsed, and he cried out in terror.

‘Whimpering will help you as much as your half-formed prayers. I suggest you cease both,’ said the primarch. He came forwards, his shoulders scraping on the roof, his dirty hair swinging around the pale, pale face from which shone eyes as black as coal. ‘Do not annoy me, and you might live.’

Elver’s head buzzed. Blackness nibbled at the edges of his vision. He fought against it. If he passed out, he would be killed. He knew that with horrifying certainty.

‘You, you don’t want to kill me?’

The primarch shrugged. It was such a human gesture, that Elver’s perception shifted, and he saw Curze not as a monster, but as a monstrous man.

‘Wanting has nothing to do with it. We are puppets of time, you and I. For the moment you live.’

He reached a long, wraith’s arm towards Elver, prompting another moan of fear. The blackness crowded in closer, tugging at his mind, his subconscious striving to save his conscious mind from terror the only way it knew how, by plunging him into ignorance.

‘I really wish you wouldn’t do that. I warned you not to be annoying. Your moaning is annoying. The smell of you is annoying. The dull, bovine intelligence gleaming in your eyes is annoying. Your lack of comprehension is annoying. I am a patient man.’ Curze giggled, and Elver thought it the most abhorrent noise he had ever heard. ‘Much more annoyance though, and I will no longer be so.’

Curze’s arm was so long and thin it seemed to stretch into forever. Under the crusted gore it was white as corpse flesh soaked long in water. Blood had flaked from his hand, clinging on only in the creases, bringing alive a topography of palm lines and scars etched in stolen life. The hand went past Elver’s nose, and he smelled the iron tang of murder, but it did not come for him. Curze depressed a button on the command throne arm that looked much like any other – in his panic he could not recognise it. It summoned into being a cartolith before Elver’s seat, whose dizzy spin mirrored that within his skull.

Curze rolled a tracking ball embedded in the throne arm near to Elver’s mutilated hand, slowing the cartolith to a stop.

‘I wish you to direct this vessel for me, to this place here.’

Curze uncurled a long finger, thin and knobbly as a spider’s leg, and pointed at a dot of light in the cartolith. Elver realised his next words would dictate whether he lived a little longer, or died in indescribable pain right there and then. At this realisation, his brain fought off the comforting dark, and spooled up to work with amazing alacrity, taking in the pulsing icon indicating the *Sheldroon*’s crawl through space, and calculating the distance between their position and where the creature wished to go faster than any

astrogative sum he had ever performed before.

Elver swallowed. Speaking without pissing himself at the same time was an immense, unwelcome effort.

‘It is…’

Curze tilted his head.

Elver stopped, and started again. ‘My lord,’ he managed, stronger now. ‘This craft is not warp capable. The place you indicate is three light years from our position.’

‘What is the speed capability of this vessel?’ asked the primarch.

‘Three quarters of light speed is the fastest it has ever gone, my lord,’ he said, robotic from long practice; the ship’s capabilities were among the first lessons Overton had given him upon arrival, and he was – had been – rightfully proud of its speed. ‘I am forced to ask your forgiveness, lord, and allow me some honesty, because I don’t know if that was Overton bragging or not. I have never seen the ship attain that velocity.’

Curze bent, and wrenched something up from the floor with a crack of breaking ice.

‘Was this he, this Overton?’ Curze displayed a ruined head.

‘No, that was Graven,’ Elver said. ‘The helmsman.’ Then he added, ‘I think.’

Curze tossed the head aside. It bounced off a console, bringing forth an angry bleep from the machines, before rolling on the floor with a noise like a wooden ball heading down a knock-pin alley.

‘If he was the helmsman, that means that you can’t sail this ship. What a pity for you.’

Curze reached for him.

‘No! No! I can, my lord, please!’ he gabbled. ‘I can fly it, I was training as a helmsman, but I learned all the other systems as well. It was a small crew… We had to know everything!’

‘Oh. Good.’ Curze relaxed. Elver could not. ‘Four years to make my destination?’ The primarch stroked Elver’s thigh with a single, ragged nail. Elver was reminded of Overton doing the same thing before hitting him – at the time it was the worst feeling in the world. Until this.

‘No! No!’ he squealed. ‘Please, my lord. A ship like this doesn’t run with an active drive. You point it and accelerate, cut the engines when you’re at optimal speed, reverse and put them back on again to slow down when you get close to where you’re going. Getting there doesn’t take too long, it’s the acceleration and deceleration that eat into the time!’ he said, in one hurried breath.

The nightmare cocked his head and folded his arms. Eyes blacker than any bird’s bored into Elver’s face, making him cringe. Black nailed fingers tapped on his biceps. Despite the impression of emaciation the primarch gave, his

muscles were enormous.

‘I am aware of how void travel works, little man,’ said the creature. He gestured widely. ‘I was testing you. This is a crude craft. A fool could pilot it. I am seeing if you are fool enough to know how.’

‘You can fly this ship?’ said Elver.

‘I am one of the Emperor’s sons. I can do anything.’

‘Then you don’t need me,’ said Elver.

‘No,’ said Curze. ‘I do not. I need nobody, and nothing.’

‘Then why spare me, when you have killed every other living being on this vessel?’ Elver asked.

‘Call me sentimental, call me merciful,’ said Curze distractedly.

Elver resolved never, ever to call Curze either of those things.

‘But it is, as you said, a long journey. I require company. Entertainment, or I should become bored.’

Elver wanted anything else in the universe other than that thing becoming bored.

‘Will you do as I bid,’ Curze continued, ‘or do you wish to share the fate of your travelling companions here? I am sure you are not without guilt.’ His long black nails uncurled, gesturing at the ruined bodies. ‘Which sentence is it to be? There is only one.’

‘I will sail for you, lord. I will serve you!’

‘Good. Good.’ Exerting minimal effort, Curze broke Elver’s chains from the throne, but left them wrapped around his ankles, wrists and neck. ‘Get on with it then.’

Curze hunched lower – not so much to avoid the human-height ceilings, but because it seemed the posture was comfortable to him. He hummed a jarringly jaunty tune as he headed for the door to the main spinal corridor, his hands idly patting at the walls.

Elver blinked in disbelief. A slaughterhouse ship was his to command. His head spun. He half expected to wake, sweating in his bunk. He knew he never would. There was no escaping this nightmare.

Accepting that calmed him. Somewhere, deep inside his heart, a little flame snuffed out. Hope dead, he was numb enough not to care.

‘My lord,’ he asked. ‘What happened to my hand?’

Curze turned back and gave a grin that froze the blood in Elver’s veins. ‘I became bored.’

NINE

MURDER AMOK

‘Boredom,’ said Curze to his flesh sculpture, many years later, ‘is among the greatest of all human sins. It demands mischief to fill it, and mischief begets disorder. Boredom is pernicious, bringing forth wickedness in those who might remain guiltless. I do not know how much to blame boredom for what happened on Nostramo, but surely it must have played its part. All those powerful men and women, from families steeped in the darkness of lawlessness for so many centuries, all of them finding their talents underemployed.’

He got up, his joints popping and cracking, warped out of true by the physical corruption unmaking the Emperor’s work, and prowled around the chamber.

‘I blame myself. If I had enacted a greater purge of Nostramo, removing those families of ancient sin from the populace, then perhaps compliance would never have broken down. I am not perfect, I make mistakes, as this universe has so cruelly taught me. Although the laws of fate do not allow a man to choose but a single course of action, it is a cruel enough master to grant us the imagination to envisage what otherwise might have been.’ He walked over to the lectern, and let his fingers trail over the soft cover of the book. ‘I can see if I had slaughtered them, and hung their lifeless bodies out in the rain, then Nostramo would have been a model world. But I trusted too much to human nature, as you made me to, as the universe dictated I do. I thought fear would be enough to keep them obedient. But arrogance, ambition, avarice, pride and – most of all – *boredom* can overcome fear in time. And it did.’

The revolution came quietly, was over in moments, and went unremarked. A muffled report of an assassin’s bullet resulted in the final triumph of the old ways, and the Imperial Governor Hashellian Eikolo Balthius lying dead.

A wisp of greasy smoke curled up from the body. Limbs crooked at angles impossible for a living being to hold, Balthius’ corpse stared at nothing, one eye bloodied with a haemorrhage, an expression of perfect shock on his face.

‘He wasn’t expecting that, sir,’ said Veyshan Tul.

Count Ashkar Skraivok handed his gun to his attendant. Tul took the gun in a black silk cloth, wrapped it and discreetly stowed it away in a bag. Just as deftly, he produced a second, identical cloth for his master to wipe his hands on.

‘Wasn’t expecting to be smashed in the face with a pistol butt, or shot, Tul?’ asked Ashkar.

He was a count solely by dint of family tradition. The Skraivoks assumed the title centuries ago to cloak their criminal activities in respectability, so long ago now it had become true, but traces of their lowly origins lingered. In Ashkar Skraivok they were pronounced. His hands were not those of an aristocrat. They were broad, scarred, with thick, strong fingers used to doing their own bloody work. Skraivok did not like to delegate, especially not something so momentous and so pleasurable as shooting the governor.

Tul smirked at the crime lord. ‘Both, I should say, sir.’

Skraivok toed the body with a foot that was as broad and powerful as his hands. ‘He was blind. If he were less of a fool, he would have seen that coming.’

Skraivok took his jacket from Tul, and shrugged it on, spending some time fiddling with the lapels. The effort was wasted. Though the jacket was finely tailored, it could do nothing to refine Skraivok’s apish build. In it, he looked exactly what he was, a criminal lord with adopted airs, and not the gentleman he purported to be.

‘Times are changing, Tul, back to the way they were in my great-great-grandfather’s time.’ The doors opened onto the finely appointed corridors of the Melanchromatic Palace. The guards in their smart government uniforms were also dead, their life already soaking away into the carpet. House Skraivok’s men – equally well uniformed, for they were an army in their own right – stood guard all around the building, ready for trouble. Skraivok snorted at the idea of danger. *He* was trouble.

He spared the governor’s corpse a final glance. ‘Clean that up, Tul,’ he ordered. ‘And call the council. Phase two begins.’

Until a few hours before, the Sphericum had been the great chamber of the Nostraman government. Currently it played host to a different sort of parliament.

A hundred and seven cartels were represented in the gathering. Some had but one spokesperson, others sent armed parties dozens strong. Correlation between numbers and power was non-existent. A couple of the greater organisations had the smallest parties, some of the weakest the largest. Nothing was ever straightforward on Nostramo.

The Sphericum rested upon a spire shoulder of Nostramo Tertius, at the very edge of the city. A single, seamless window curved around the sphere, in a shape that evoked the waves of the midnight sea the Sphericum overlooked.

The edges were broken up artistically into smaller, abstract shapes to represent foam, and small seabirds of glass dipped over the tallest peaks. On the opaque parts of the dome a huge mural told Nostramo's history, commencing with stylised colony vessels piercing the clouds, incorporating ancient lion hunts, the beauty of dark mountains, the horrors of strife, and the raising of the hives. The world's less than savoury past was overlooked in this triumphal art – ironic, thought Skraivok, looking at the assemblage of family heads in the chamber. There was not an honest man or woman in the room, but nor had there been when the Council of Nine held sway.

That was exactly how Skraivok believed it should be. Honesty was overrated.

The sunless world lived up to its name. Blackness outside turned the window into a huge mirror. Ghostly reflections distorted by the curve mocked the gathering. Beyond this court of phantoms, thick black clouds boiled over everything, the oppressiveness of Nostramo's meteorology unobscured there at the very fringe of the city, where no buildings rose to block out the night. Electric glow shone from hundreds of towers along the coast, more from the greater spires set back from the water, and by the shore the clouds' undersides shone with colourful light pollution, transforming them into a roiling lid for a world of gold, steel, and bronze. Further out, away over the rising chop of the black waves, the clouds ran free of human influence, and there they were blacker than the void – blackest at the horizon, where a sable band sutured sea and sky indivisibly together.

Skraivok occupied the speaker's podium where, since before compliance, the leader of the house had led the planetary lords in debate. A number of those planetary lords were present in the Sphericum now; a good many more had the sense to be elsewhere, watching closely from their estates or from safety off-world. Only three of the highest nine were in attendance, sweating in their ornate thrones in the mostly empty row in front of the podium. None of them mattered to Skraivok. All of them were too weak to make a difference, high or low, present or not.

It was nearly time. The last of the true lords of Nostramo sauntered in, pointedly late. Judging the assembly complete, Skraivok tapped at the voxmitter mounted on the podium. An ear-splitting feedback squeal silenced the crowd.

'Good ladies and gentlemen of Nostramo,' Skraivok said, his voice booming round the room, reflected back onto his audience by the world's dishonest history.

The less composed of the audience laughed at that. They knew what they were.

'I have brought you here today to tell you that the governor's rule is at an end,' said Skraivok. 'Balthius has been encouraged to step down, and after

something of an argument, he agreed. I think in his heart he saw I was correct. He did not put up much of a fight.'

More laughter. The three members of the Council of Nine who attended watched grim-faced. Only one had any guts, Tothriar Gillaneish. His knuckles went white on the dark wood of his throne, and he half rose. He shook, not like the other pair who quaked in fear, but in fury.

'This is illegal,' Gillaneish said.

That really set the crowd going.

Gillaneish was not done. He stood slowly, very slowly, as if his anger weighed him down. He glared right into Skraivok's face.

'This is an outrage!' he shouted over catcalls and laughter. 'You turn your back on the primarch's works. You turn your back on the Imperium!'

'That is kind of the idea,' said Skraivok, again to great approval. He allowed his fellows to vent their mirth for a few moments, then quieted them with four strikes from the governor's gavel, an orb of black basalt quarried from the darkest point on the planet. 'Quiet now,' he said. 'You have it wrong, councilman,' Skraivok said. 'We are not *seceding* from the Imperium. Why would we do that? Rebellion invites destruction!' he said. 'And why would we let ourselves be vulnerable in the lonely dark of this violent galaxy? The Imperium offers protection!'

A lone gang lord, unused to refined company, barked out a cackle, causing the more sophisticated to scowl at him, and their guards to finger their weapons.

Gillaneish shook his head disbelievingly. 'You will bring disaster on us all.'

'No, I won't. I mean it. Compliance has brought many benefits to us, not least the opportunity to make plenty of money.' He smiled. 'I don't want to leave this world vulnerable to attack, whether from xenos or Terran retribution fleets. That's not what this assembly is about.'

'What you have done is outright rebellion,' said Gillaneish.

'You're incorrect there again, my lord. This isn't rebellion,' said Skraivok, wagging his finger. He stepped down from the podium, taking the orb of stone with him. 'Compliance allows us to follow whichever system of governance our society deems fit. Civil wars have been fought and lost under the Imperium's nose since the crusade began. The Emperor doesn't give a damn, my friend, provided He gets His due in blood and adamantium, and I intend to ensure He does. This will be a smooth transition of power.'

'What about the primarch? He will find out.'

'Not until it is too late, and he won't care anyway.' Skraivok began tossing the basalt ball into the air and catching it. 'The astropathic temple has been seized. Temporarily. We are already undergoing negotiations with all Imperial Adepta. This is an internal matter. Our tithes will be paid in full. The only difference here is who will be getting rich off it. You milk-blooded lordlings,

you have no idea how to rule this world. None of you came from the old families. You're all new.' He wafted his hand in front of Gillaneish's chest. 'The smell of weakness still clings to you four generations on.'

'Our ancestors were chosen for their ability,' said Gillaneish, turning on the spot to follow Skraivok as he paced around him.

'They were chosen because they were easy to control,' said Skraivok dismissively. 'The real rulers of this world are here, in this room.' He extended a finger around the stone ball and pointed at the people filling the chamber. 'The Night Haunter spent so much time beating us down, but we never went away. We were there, in the shadows, plying our trades, biding our time.' He shrugged. 'Now our time has come again.'

Gillaneish watched with watery, yellowing eyes. His entrenched morality extended to refusing anti-agapic treatments. He wasn't so many years older than Skraivok, but looked like his grandfather. 'You don't understand what you're throwing away. The people–'

'The people!' Skraivok pinched his nose wearily. 'Konrad Curze doesn't remember the people. He doesn't remember us either. We're throwing nothing away but bureaucratic chains. We'll obey Imperial writ, but we're doing things our way again. It is time for the grand families to rise and reclaim their birthright.'

'The Night Haunter will not allow this!' said Gillaneish. 'When he discovers what you have done, you will be punished. The Night Haunter sees all, punishes all!'

'You're wrong, old man. He's already failed. Once he went, the fear went. Without that there was nothing to keep anarchy in check. Do you think you have done a good job, up here in your tower? You and your kind have presided over the collapse of order, hiding in these palaces, while the gangs came back. Have you been on the streets recently? The primarch cares for nothing and nobody. If he did, he would have left some of his warriors here to keep things in line. Whatever good he ever did this place is already gone. He's taken all the best this planet has to offer, leaving us with the dregs. What way is that to build the Emperor's paradise?'

'The Great Crusade demands sacrifices,' said Gillaneish.

The crowd hooted derisively.

'The Great Crusade!' scoffed Skraivok. 'The Great Crusade bleeds us. What do we get in return? A slow slide into anarchy.'

'We were addressing the fall in standards. More prisons, more–'

'No, you weren't,' Skraivok interrupted. 'You don't understand this world, people like you. Do you think this is some sudden change? No! This has been happening for a long time.' Skraivok grinned. His neck muscles bulged, forcing aside the collar of his shirt so that his gang tattoos poked out. He stepped closer to Gillaneish, getting into his personal space, their faces close

enough to touch. ‘We need to take control. We need to be strong. I’ll not watch my family sink into poverty while open war between the cartels destroys the world. Anarchy is the natural state of Nostramo, but it need not be destructive. The Night Haunter only halted the normal run of business temporarily. Where is he now? Where?’

Gillaneish stared at him in pure hatred.

‘Don’t stare at me like that. Look around you, Lord Gillaneish. All these people here lost ancestors to the Night Haunter. They were scared, I’m sure they’ll all admit it. See? I was scared. I am not ashamed to say that I was terrified of that monster, though I was born years after he left. That’s what he relies on. Other worlds get enlightenment, and refined leaders. Not us, and do you know why, Gillaneish?’ Skraivok poked the lord hard in his chest. ‘It’s because we don’t deserve it. We made this place, and it made us. The Night Haunter, what was he? An intrusion from the outside. Someone else’s dream turned nightmare. No longer. We’ll stay part of the Imperium, but fear is done. Fear is rule of the weak, we in this chamber are the strong!’ He stepped back and held aloft his arms, encouraging cheers from the rest. ‘Anarchy stops. You worthless politicians have had your time. Without Curze, you’re nothing. We’ll carve it up, all of it, between us, the rightful lords and ladies of the sunless world. We’ll restore things to the way they should be, not the rule of fear, but the rule of might. It isn’t perfect, it is not good, but it is who we are. We deny Nostramo’s nature no longer. You cannot rule a planet through fear when there is nothing to be frightened of.’

Skraivok gestured behind him. Veyshan Tul stepped up with a fat document. Skraivok took it in his open hand, and pushed it at Gillaneish.

‘This is the new constitution,’ he said. ‘You lords here will sign it. The governor’s days are done. From now on, Nostramo will be ruled for the benefit of the families who made it what it is. In the Emperor’s name, of course. A council of nine family heads to replace the nine sinecurists imposed by Curze, supported by a parliament of cartels.’

‘It’ll never work, violence is all you people understand.’

‘Violence?’ said Skraivok. ‘Do you think that’s what we want? War between families? It’s wasteful. We just want to make money. Sign it.’

Gillaneish’s eyes flicked down. The new constitution was written in fine handwriting on creamy paper soft as water; Nostramo’s violent nature distilled into beauty. It was a planet of poets and killers with precious little between.

‘No,’ Gillaneish said.

‘Is the wrong answer,’ said Skraivok. ‘I want the record to reflect Lord Gillaneish refused to sign the papers, and was called to order.’ He tossed the stone gavel one more time in his hand, and with sudden and shocking violence slammed it into Gillaneish’s temple.

The old man fell into a half crouch, eyes rolling, a mouth that could no longer speak moaning open. A round indentation in his head beckoned the sphere to nestle in it.

The ball accepted the invitation. Blood oozed up through split skin at the second strike. The third blow shattered his skull, and Gillaneish dropped to the ground.

‘This could have been so easy,’ said Skraivok to the dead lord. He flicked blood off the paper. Spots lengthened into streaks and dripped to the floor, bringing out a grimace of annoyance from the aristocrat. He rounded on the other two Lords of the Nine, the constitution held out before him in accusation, placing blame for Gillaneish’s death on their intransigence. There was punishment in his eyes of the most final kind.

‘You two will sign it.’

‘But… but… we’re not quorate,’ stammered one.

‘Sign the damn paper,’ said Skraivok. ‘Or I’ll bring you to order too.’ He hefted the gavel. Slimy with blood, it slid in his fingers, threatening to escape and kill again.

The two Lords of the Nine took the document, and signed with trembling hands.

The embarkation deck of the *Umber Prince* heaved with activity. The largest hangar upon the cruiser possessed enough space to house dozens of ships. It was dark as the Night Lords preferred it, lumens dimmed so low the multitudes of serfs working there needed lamp packs to see. Upon the faces of their overseers and the deck officers, vision enhancement goggles glowed fuzzy green.

If sight was starved, hearing was overwhelmed. The clangour of resupply made confusion of all sound. At a frantic pace the fleet repaired, refitted and restocked before their scheduled redeployment from Toza IV to the outward rim. Shuttles bellowed in to noisy landing. Ship impellers thrummed the grav-plating of the deck, the two opposing sources of artificial gravity setting up complex, competing waves that forced miniature tides in the fluids of the body. Those fresh to the workforce lost their balance and moved woozily under the influence.

Cranes clanked and whined on rails, taking full cargo containers deep into the ship’s holds, and bringing empties out. Deck vehicles shrilled warning beeps, their dim, rotating lumens colouring all they passed a midwinter blue. Ground crews crowded passenger trucks, heaped cargoes secured by wide-meshed nets filled flatbed trailers. Men shouted through voxmitters to be heard. Orders blasted from speakers, their words incomprehensible, only adding to the volume of noise.

There was not an object that did not in some way speak. They rumbled, roared, squeaked, shouted, whined, beeped, whistled, ground, growled and

sang in a cacophony of machine voices.

Among the bustle of lesser men sweating out their lives for the benefit of the Emperor's war machine, one person awaited a delivery of special importance. He was Gendor Skraivok, called the Painted Count, Claw-Master of the 45th Company, and lord of the *Umber Prince*. Gendor Skraivok found the racket profoundly irritating, but was bareheaded nonetheless, standing in the shadows for there was nowhere else to stand. The twin black streaks that gave him his name cut slashes of dark over his eyes, so that he appeared to be some revenant roused from the pits of a heathen afterlife, come to glower at the noise.

Despite his stern demeanour, Skraivok was eager, infused with energy, in marked contrast to the dour warrior who stood guard at his back.

'This is a momentous day, Kellendvar, ripe with possibility.' He sniffed deeply of the air. 'I can smell the future! Opportunity approaches with its arms wide.'

The company headsman shifted his hands on the counterweight of his upended giant chainaxe.

Skraivok was a garrulous, self-congratulatory man, and not dissuaded by his headsman's silence.

'In the holds of the approaching vessel you see there is our Legion's future. Its potential. The true face of the Eighth!'

The Painted Count nodded to the void past the atmospheric retention field shining across the hangar slot, where a flat, dull transporter sailed between a thousand other vessels. Outside the *Umber Prince* the activity was every bit as frantic as within. Lines of lighters and cargo haulers filed up from the planet turning sleepily under the ships' keels, splitting into a complex, dizzying braid of flightpaths that fed every warship and tender. More twists of light and steel descended, looping through and around the ascending vessels. Emptied of weapons, food, water, fuel and men, they returned to single files when past the pickets of the fleet, and flew back down to port to do it all again.

But it was to that one ship alone that Gendor Skraivok referred, and he watched it with a joyful light in his eyes.

'I have received this month notice from our home world that there has been a change of regime,' said Skraivok. 'From a relative of mine, actually, a cousin of third or fourth or who cares what degree.' He waved his armoured hand dismissively, the growl of his armour joints vanishing into the echoing, noisy hangar. 'Does it surprise you, Kellendvar, that I have contacts upon Nostramo?'

Kellendvar didn't care, and didn't reply.

'We Nostramans are creatures of gang and family,' Skraivok continued. 'I remember my people, royalty among underhive scum, and my obligations,

though my memories are faint.' He paused a moment as a thought occurred. 'Do you think it is intentional, Kellendvar? Do they rob us of our past to make us more pliable to their rule? By them, I mean our overlords and masters from Terra. All praise be heaped upon them,' he added with great sarcasm. 'Why should I not remember who I am, and where I am from? The Legion is all, but it is not everything. A man cannot fight for an ideal alone. He must be motivated. Obedience to an ideal is a fine thing, but it does not guarantee commitment. Throughout history, men have fought for their families, to ensure the continuation of their line and their nation. To gather resources, to protect their loved ones, to further the goals of their tribe. Men rarely, if ever fought solely for *someone else's ideal*.' The last was delivered acidly, bleaching the cheer from the Painted Count's voice.

Kellendvar shifted. He was bored by Skraivok's babbling. 'Does it matter, Gendor?'

'Matter? Does anything matter, really, Kellendvar?' said Skraivok airily, managing to recapture only a portion of his earlier good spirits. 'I can think of only one thing that does, and that is power. To deprive a man of who he was is a violation. Violation is the ultimate expression of power, as any poor waif on the streets of Nostramo comes to learn. As legionaries we are mighty, but we are not powerful. We live to serve. We have no choice how we apply our might. As every good gang understands, there is only so much power one man can wield. To take on too much is to risk failure. As the Imperium grows, this truth becomes ever more apparent. Power must be *shared*, Kellendvar, power must be *devolved*. Our culture recognises that. The Imperium does not. It is time to add our experience to the greater sum of Imperial knowledge, and hasten the progress of this Great Crusade towards a more realistic end – the establishment of the rule of the strong.'

'What has this to do with that ship?' asked Kellendvar, drawn in despite himself, if only to hurry Skraivok on to a conclusion.

Skraivok grinned. 'The ship,' he said. The vessel was nearing the hangar now, the seams of its hull plates visible, running lights throwing flashes of colour into the *Umber Prince*'s stygian heart. 'Ours is a Legion of terror. We were made to be the monsters no one else could be, and we have embraced our purpose. Who better to perform the role of terrorists than men lacking mercy? That is the nature of the communication from home. Of course, it is for my ears only, higher command need not hear of it – should not, in fact. This is our little secret. Who knows how Curze would react?' One eye disappeared completely into his tattoo as he winked, the lid being darkly inked too. 'The new regime deems it wasteful to send the best of Nostramo to the Legion. Our world cries out for good, strong men. Sending the most intelligent, the strongest, to be turned into tools of fear is an abomination. The activities of certain of the recruitment guilds have been adopted by all. The

prisons will be emptied to fill the belly of our Legion.'

'Illegal activities,' said Kellendvar. 'Crimes committed for profit, that have already tainted our ranks.'

Skraivok held up his finger. 'Done maliciously, I agree, but done purposefully, it is useful. The recruitment procedures have been reformed. This new crop are among the worst of all men. Sending them to us is a benefit to the home world and our Legion. Everyone wins!' His sharp laugh abruptly ceased. 'Except perhaps those we are unleashed upon. Our Lord Curze demands we be a weapon of fear. What is more fearsome than a boy who would kill without compunction? Or take his pleasure as he will, without regard to others?'

'The stock we have received lately has been poor,' said Kellendvar, pressing his objection. 'Why celebrate it?'

'It was poor only because it was poorly handled,' snapped Skraivok. 'You are being rather objectionable considering the nature of your brother, Kellendvar. Kellenkir is the kind of man I am talking about. He is fearless *and* fearsome.'

Kellendvar made a noise of annoyance, amplified by his helm to a growl. If Skraivok heard over the clattering deck he did not remark upon it.

'It is true this kind of recruit will not respond well to psycho-indoctrination or appeals to higher morality. We must exploit their natures. Their drives are of the baser sort, and therefore easy to control. I shall alter the training regimen of the Forty-fifth Company to suit, don't you worry.'

The ship's flat, broad prow entered the hangar, the integrity field sectioning it with a blue line as the craft eased in. Vapour chilled from the air swirled over the metal. A klaxon blared. Lights snapped on around the ship's designated landing bay, summoning the ship into berth and sending servitors trudging out of the way.

Engines sighing, the ship entered the *Umber Prince*, the largest the hangar could take, its outspread atmospheric wings passing scant metres from the edges of the slot. Plasma jets shrieked, brushing black rings onto the dull deck. Grav plating thrummed as it reversed to cushion the ship's mass.

Almost delicately, landing claws clicked upon the metal. The ship eased down upon its hydraulics, swallowing greased pistons into its bulk, and there squatted, ticking and groaning from the exertions of flight.

A high ranking Legion serf strode towards the vessel, full of the self-importance of little men. Skraivok's ungentle hand in his path took the wind from his sails as well as his lungs.

'I will take it from here,' said Gendor Skraivok.

Taking care not to show the breath was knocked from him, the serf bowed and held out a data-slate. 'As you wish, my lord captain. New recruits.'

'I am aware,' said Skraivok. 'Find yourself other business for a minute.

Wait with your serviles.’ He looked to the small block of serfs in medicae white ready to take the recruits to the apothecarium. ‘Over there. With them,’ he said, when the official was slow in responding.

The man bowed again. ‘My lord.’ He rejoined his men.

‘The first thing these new warriors should see is the might of what they will become – not meek serfs bowing and scraping, but lords of the stars!’ Skraivok waved the data-slate at the headsman, beckoning him to follow.

A single gangplank descended midway down the ship’s fuselage. A pair of human recruit masters came out first, shock goads ready. After them shuffled a pack of blinking youths in irons who hid their confusion behind defiant, killer’s stares. More recruit masters brought up the rear.

‘Fine additions to our ranks,’ said Kellendvar sarcastically.

‘Silence now, headsman,’ said Skraivok. ‘You are becoming as insolent as your brother, a characteristic I do not approve of.’

The Painted Count walked under the creaking hull, and stopped before the small crowd of recruits. The recruit masters parted, allowing the boys to see their lord.

‘I am Gendor Skraivok, Claw-Master of the Forty-fifth Company. Your new master.’

He let them process the information, relishing the fear lurking under the boys’ bravado. ‘You are here at the command of the lords of Nostramo, chosen for your murderous and pitiless natures,’ he said. ‘In less enlightened times, you would have died for your misdeeds, but we shall make use of you!’

Skraivok made a point of staring into the eyes of each one, noting which looked afraid, and those who showed no emotion at all.

He pulled his fingers down his face, following the twin streaks of sooty black tattooed over his eyes. ‘These marks here were given to me by my father. Not our Lord Curze, but my birth father, who demanded that his sons be strong, and unafraid. My father was the master of his own destiny, who, even in the ordered realm the great primarch ordained Nostramo to be, was feared and mighty. Though I am of noble birth, I spent much of my childhood running with the likes of you, in the poison rain of the hive slums, choked by pollution, hunted by those who thought themselves stronger than me. I killed my first man when I was ten. My second days later. My father declared me the strongest of his sons, and marked me so to display it.’ He pointed at various youths wearing similar marks. ‘Like you, who also bear the marks of strength. “You will never look out from anything but shadow now,” my father said as the tattooist’s needle stung me. I relished the pain for the approval it showed. I am a murderer. I was born in a society of murderers. I am proud of my heritage, a true son of the sunless world! You should be proud too. We will not change your nature, but hone it.’

He let his words die in the general noise of the deck.

‘You will know suffering greater than any artist’s needle. Your bodies will be marked by more than crude sigils. When the pain is done, you will be reforged, given power to spread terror in the Emperor’s name.’ He held up his hand, his pauldron shifting with a growl to accommodate the movement. ‘We are Night Lords, the glorious Eighth, we look to our gene-father, the fabled Night Haunter, who would have slaughtered you all for your crimes were he still upon Nostramo. You will serve him instead. Purge your sins with blood and pain. Murder and maim for the good of humanity, with the words “Ave Dominus Nox” forever on your lips. You owe your allegiance to him now, the master of the night.’ He paused. ‘But your obedience belongs to me, your captain, your claw-master.’ He paused again, and lowered his voice, pitching it so it still carried over the noise. ‘I welcome you who will successfully endure the process of apotheosis into our brotherhood. Those who fail will still know a life of meaningful toil as serfs, if you survive. All of you have a second chance – the purgation of sin through service, the dispensation of justice through terror.’

Skraivok finished. There was no applause. He gave the youths one last imperious stare, then signalled the recruit masters and the apothecarion staff.

‘Take them away. Begin testing and implantation immediately.’

The boys trooped by. A few were shaking. A handful glared at the legionaries with naked hostility. Skraivok chuckled indulgently. Kellendvar lunged at them, making them jump and stumble over their chains. He snorted at their fear.

‘They are wretches,’ said Kellendvar. His voice was leaden through his vox grille.

‘At this moment, yes,’ said Skraivok, ‘but with them we shall reforge this Legion in a new image, a cadre of killers like no other before it, merciless, without conscience. Let others be the sword of the Emperor. We shall be its dagger in the night!’

‘They are weak, Gendor, murderers, criminals. You should not give them this power.’

‘So, I should take it away from your brother too?’

‘This is madness! Inform the primarch. Kill these cattle. No good will come of this.’

‘I will not, and neither will you. Their weakness is their strength,’ said Skraivok. ‘They will hearken to a strong leader. They will be faithful. They will be loyal, you will see.’

‘Loyal to the Legion, or to you?’ said Kellendvar.

Gendor Skraivok smiled.

TEN

CARRION WORLD

‘Men like Gendor Skraivok were the first hints of the wickedness that would befall my Legion,’ said Curze to his corpse statue. ‘Selfish, interested only in power. There were many like him. In my impatience to see your vision fulfilled, I marginalised them rather than purging them, relying on the most faithful, men like Sevatar. Sevatar understood, he saw the need for fear to bring order to the galaxy. My other captains were allowed to wage war as they liked so long as they achieved my objectives. I did not pay their misdeeds enough attention. By the time I noticed the rot, it had run its roots deep into the heart of many companies.’ His face wrinkled in disdain. ‘I was better alone. You made me a general, yet did not give me the capacity to act like one. So many errors, father.’

He flipped through his book, smiling at certain passages, scowling at others. ‘Such a thing it is, to write a book. I am tempted now to scratch whole sections out and begin them again, but then, that would result in a different book. What has been set down must be preserved. It can only be changed so much, until it is a new thing altogether, and the truth of its original nature lost.’ He closed the book and stalked around the chamber, passing around the back of his mock-father, stepping over the savaged body of the unfortunate slave. He straightened, adopting the air of a man dictating a letter, or a scholam master lecturing his students. ‘I was never true to myself, always trying to do what you expected of me, for little thanks. When I came here again, to this place, I realised that I had to stop trying. I had to embrace my fate. I am a monster, father, and should be punished for it. That is what I am, and that is where my destiny leads.’ He smiled sadly. ‘Why fight it?’

Flashes of things yet to be forced themselves into Elver’s nightmares.

Giants clad in armour the colour of midnight storms crowded him, each so huge he felt small as a rat. Dust raced through a chill atmosphere, stinging his skin, scratching his eyes.

Konrad Curze looked at him for one last time, and Elver saw he did not care at all what happened to him.

Dozens of pairs of slanted ruby eyes shone their malevolence upon Elver.

‘My lord!’ he cried.

An armoured hand reached for him.

Gentle trilling woke Elver from his troubled sleep, not that he experienced any other kind. He rolled over, his single eye bleary, the numbers on the chronograph swimming in his vision.

In primitive digital sticks of green, the chronograph displayed the time and the subjective date. Neither of these measures were as important as the third set of data, a countdown ticking towards zero.

He stared at it, not believing that after so long it was nearing the end.

‘It’s time,’ he said.

He rubbed his left hand over his face. It’d taken him a long time to get used to doing that with his left rather than his right. Scars ran down his cheeks from the time he’d forgotten the augmetic claw Curze had given him for a right hand.

He groaned, and sat on the edge of the bed. There was recaff to be drunk, and a long day ahead, but first a small moment of contemplation. This was a momentous occasion, long in coming.

The time had come to prep the ship for deceleration.

It took him three attempts to stand. Curze’s boredom had cost Elver dearly.

In the years since his arrival, Curze had taken three more of Elver’s fingers, the lower half of his left leg – not all of it gone in one easy session, but nibbled away, centimetre by centimetre over months. Curze had torn out Elver’s right eye in a night of terror that still made him want to scream. A smooth patch of skin crossed by an ugly, puckered scar covered over the socket.

The worst injury was to Elver’s right arm. That was the one that had nearly killed him. One evening, Curze had pounced on him without warning, borne him away and, tittering madly, had peeled the skin from his forearm and hand with such agonising slowness that Elver had begged that he rip it off in one go to get it over with. Curze had left him in a bloody heap. He’d contracted an infection shortly after, and nearly died.

When the primarch returned, it was to save him. Elver’s simpering gratitude for the crude augmetic Curze replaced his arm with shocked him. He came closest to becoming a snivelling cur at that point. Afterwards, he expected to break, waited for it, but it never happened. Under pressure, part of Elver’s being compressed into a small, cold diamond, and this place of strength became a harbour for his sanity. As bad as things got, he never went mad, he never broke; he prided himself on that, and Curze seemed to respect him for it. An equilibrium of sorts was struck between defiance and deference, and between terror and Elver’s determination to survive. There was no other way to be. There was nowhere to hide. Curze could hear Elver’s heart from the other end of the vessel. He could taste his fear on the air. The

multiple locks and bars Elver put on his door were little barrier to the primarch's strength, but he used them anyway.

Elver reflected on these things as he limped through the *Sheldroon*. Without maintenance from Overton's piratical crew, the ship had suffered. A lot of the things that he needed to do could no longer be controlled from the command deck. He was prepared for a long day.

As he worked, he waited for Curze to appear and butcher another part of his body. Respect did not stop the primarch; he couldn't help himself. Curze paid no attention to Elver's pleas, or his tears, not when the darkness was on him. But after each session of abuse he would treat Elver as if nothing had happened. Sometimes, he would spend time with Elver, and instruct him in various matters. In those rare days Elver glimpsed the regal being beneath the filth. Elver's world expanded under his tutelage even as, on other occasions, his body was whittled away, knife stroke by knife stroke, by the ragged king.

For much of the voyage Elver didn't see Curze. Weeks could go by when he had no idea where the primarch was lurking. Occasionally he found evidence of the primarch's presence. One time, he came across a hundred rats crucified on tiny crosses, each one's abdominal cavity carefully opened and pinned back. Several were still alive, their tiny hearts twitching. The amount of work Curze must have done to create this macabre display chilled him more than anything. Against this background of fear, Elver attempted to do his duties as best he could until, in the end, terror became mundane.

He reached a switchboard for the starboard thruster array. The remote system to set the ship for directional change had burned out, and he'd needed to wire in the controls directly. He checked his makeshift repairs to the activation circuit. It looked like it still worked. If it didn't, then the thrusters wouldn't fire to flip the ugly freighter around, and they'd carry on their merry way forever.

He closed the box door.

He missed Curze when he was absent.

Throughout the pain and the boredom, the *Sheldroon* coasted on towards Tsagualsa. It ran quietly, its halls host to nothing but ghosts and rats creeping up from the bilges, its lumens dimming and dying one by one.

Elver limped painfully to the enginarium. The arm was the only gift Curze gave him. His stolen leg was replaced by a simple peg of metal he'd had to make himself. It had amused Curze to shorten his leg further after Elver had made it, so it had never fit right. Elver was no metalsmith, and the leg was uncomfortable, its cup socket chafing perpetually at his stump.

Simple freighters like the *Sheldroon* lacked the giant propulsive units and the reactors to power them that mightier craft possessed, relying for the most part on inertia. Nevertheless, the energy required to accelerate to its top speed was considerable, as was that required to slow back down. Elver had waited

for this moment for twenty months, looking forward so much to the break in his monotonous existence that it had become something of an obsession. Turning over such a long and cumbersome ship was a technically challenging exercise, especially when undertaken alone. Now it had come, he found the preparation tedious. It went on and on, and so much could go wrong.

The last few hours were hectic. There was a little leeway to his deadline, but not enough, and the final moment he could possibly fire the main engines rushed at him with terrifying speed.

By the time all was done, he was tired. His aching eye stared into the lights of false stars hanging in the bridge cartolith. He'd checked it a thousand times already, but felt the need to key his calculations into the ship's primitive astrogator one final time. Its simple logic engine hummed inside its dented casting. Eventually, the green indicator lumen came on with an audible snap, and flickered at him impatiently, the same way it had done every other time.

Elver grunted, then went around the bridge priming switches and rerouting key controls to the command throne. He hauled himself over and sat down. Fragments of the chains with which Curze had bound him to the seat still hung there. The blood of the crew clung blackly to the deck, years later, reduced to a kind of tar. Once he'd got the heat back on in there, it had rotted slowly, stinking the place out for weeks. Only stains remained of human life. He didn't even notice them anymore.

He pulled the brass keyboard over his lap, and activated the control systems.

Everything was ready. He looked behind him, half expecting the primarch's abyssal eyes to glitter in the gloom there, but there was no sign of him. Elver was disappointed.

'Activate,' he said, to no one, and activated the attitudinal thrusters. A growing pressure pushed down on him as the ship swung about on its axis. 'No going back now,' he muttered.

Moments of crisis came and went, each headed off before it became disaster. Adrenaline granted him speed and focus. Once the ship was turned, he spooled up the main drive and ignited its plasma jets. The final act went unexpectedly smoothly. Before he knew it, they were slowing down.

It was inevitable that Elver would feel a sense of anticlimax. All his effort and his hard won expertise were applied successfully. Now it was done. Even the change in the ship's noises, vibrating and rumbling with distant engine roar after years of silence, was a novelty for only a few moments, before it became the new constant.

Months stretched ahead, months of waiting for Curze to strike, or to come speak with him; equally terrifying experiences. And then what?

Elver shuddered. He left the bridge in a hurry and barricaded himself in his room.

There he picked up the bottle of rough spirits he'd been saving for the day, and drank it all without a shred of celebration.

Finally, finally, Tsagualsa lay beneath them. Elver looked at it through the scratched observation blister, the sole window anywhere on the whole of the *Sheldroon* outside of the airlocks. His manically grinning face reflected off the inside. He was a dishevelled lunatic, he thought, and so what? To get there he'd had to provide himself with the education Overton had singularly failed to give, and so much more besides. He was now a capable engineer, astrogator, pilot and captain.

'I'm a one-man crew,' he said to himself proudly.

The cost of his expertise stared back at him. His face, never pretty, was ruined. The prize his efforts had won him was not much to look at either.

Tsagualsa was the ugliest planet he had ever seen, and all he had ever seen were ugly worlds. A sphere whose colour palette extended solely to various hues of grey. Continental plates frozen by long inactivity scabbed the edges of dust seas. The sun was small, white and warmthless. Grey, white and black, the view was of a universe bled of all life.

A reflected face appeared next to his, huge and inhuman, pale and colourless as the scene on the other side of the armourglass blister. Dark hair cut Curze's face into ragged stripes. Black holes stared where the glint of soul-light should shine.

Elver's grin became a rictus. His heart leapt in his chest. Sweat prickled all over his body.

'Tsagualsa,' said Konrad Curze. 'You have done well.'

Curze's voice so close to Elver's ear in the cramped blister sent painful shivers through him that reawakened the agony of torture, and stabbed at phantom limbs with hot daggers.

'What now, my lord?'

'We land,' said Curze. 'Prepare the ship's shuttle.'

The primarch departed as soundlessly as he had arrived.

When Elver ventured out from the blister into the gangway only a second later, the primarch was nowhere to be seen.

Elver added 'atmospheric shuttle pilot' to his list of skills. He'd anticipated Curze's lack of interest in flying to the surface. There was no simulator on board the *Sheldroon*. Venturing into the void risked becoming lost in it, so his experience was restricted to lifting the shuttle off and landing it within the cramped docking bay, and reading the operating manual so many times he saw the words floating in his vision when he fell asleep at night.

He was well aware that was pitifully insufficient.

Leaving the *Sheldroon* was child's play. He had become totally familiar with the battered shuttle's systems by then. Nevertheless, he was not naive

enough to believe atmospheric entry would be easy, and he was not wrong.

Tsagualsa did not appreciate visitors. Winds tearing around its upper atmosphere sent the ship into a bouncing descent that had Elver wrestling with controls imbued with a sudden, malicious life of their own. The ship slewed from side to side, sending it kilometres away from Curze's polar landing zone. Elver dragged too hard at the controls, his overcompensation sending them kilometres away in the opposite direction. The ship bounced, swerved and dropped down through the violent Tsagualsan air. Ventral vid cameras showed nothing but the blankness of a dust storm rising to meet them. Graphical displays depicted the slalom twist of their landing corridor as Elver's inexpert piloting bent it out of shape. Alarms chimed and bleeped at him from every quarter. His hands slipped sweatily on the flight sticks. The engines howled in complaint. They fell through the cloud ceiling into fogs of dust that made the atmospheric engines scream. More alarms joined them as robust components suffered friction damage. The wind speed picked up, tossing the small ship around. Elver gritted his teeth, a soft grumble of concentration in his throat rising to a moan of panic. They were coming in too fast, too hard. Nothing he did seemed to help.

Throughout their plummet, Curze sat at the back of the shuttle. There were four other seats in the cockpit, all too small for him, so he sat on the floor with his back to the door, long, dirty fingers gripping the backs of the chairs in front of him so hard the worn upholstery split. The reflection of his unblinking glower in the cockpit canopy swam in and out of Elver's view.

Wind howled around the ship. The shuttle pitched violently to the left, nearly flinging Elver from his seat, like a horse dissatisfied with an amateur rider.

The ship's minor systems were less bullish, and eager to help. Proximity alarms screamed. Dark grey crags flashed by to starboard. Elver yelled, yanking the ship to the side, tipping it further back to port, then struggled to bring it back under control. It went into a drifting spin. Altimeters whirred downwards.

'I would fire the braking thrusters and extend the landing struts, if I were you,' said Curze calmly.

'Yes, my lord!' Elver's good hand swept banks of toggle switches in the hope of activating the landing gear on the way to punching the thruster switch. The ship bucked, swung around. The struts squealed out of their housing, bringing new notes from the gale screaming around the ship.

The altimeter was still running down too fast. Zero approached with terrifying speed.

'Brace, my lord!' shouted Elver.

Curze remained unmoving. Elver dragged back to the flight sticks, twisting them, trying without success to halt the ship's spin and level it out.

A second later hard rocks greeted the shuttle with a resounding crash.

The landing claws must have taken the brunt of the impact, for the ship remained in one piece. Still, Elver thought his spine had been kicked out of the top of his head. He blacked out, coming round to the ship sitting more or less level upon a plain of grey sand rippling with shrouds of gale-chased dust.

He was frankly surprised to be alive. The instruments winked and burbled quietly, all their complaints over. Green and yellow replaced the red of alarm. Environmental readouts showed racing wind and freezing temperatures, but the air carried sufficient oxygen to breathe.

‘I did it,’ he said. For the second time that day, a crazed grin split his face. ‘I did it!’

He looked around for the primarch. The cockpit door was open onto the small cargo bay. Curze was approaching the ramp release.

Elver looked at the dust storm in alarm. He needed protective equipment. Goggles at least, and a respirator. Dust like that would shred his lungs.

‘My lord, please, wait!’

Elver struggled to release his restraints before staggering up from his pilot’s seat. His neck twinged mightily. His head ached. The ship rocked on its landing claws in the storm.

‘My lord, please, I need to prepare!’

Curze turned to regard him silently, his hand hovering over the button.

Elver pulled himself through the door, half throwing himself at the supply locker. He dragged out his breathing kit and shrugged the purification tanks onto his back; he had no time to pull on the coat he’d brought down from orbit.

‘We are home,’ said Curze. ‘I am going out.’ His hand descended towards the gangplank switch.

‘Wait!’ shouted Elver. Gasping, he struggled his backpack on, twisting knobs to activate it. He couldn’t run the checks he should.

He was trying to catch the respirator mouthpiece swinging on its rubber tube when Curze pressed the door release with a gentle finger, and let Tsagualsa within the ship.

Wind shriek overrode the door mechanism’s hum.

Barely had the door opened a crack before talcum-fine dust blasted into Elver’s face, drying out his throat and mouth instantaneously, and cutting at his innards with razor edges. He tugged on his respirator; like all his equipment it was a composite piece salvaged from the best components on the *Sheldroon*. Even with a crew’s complement to choose from, it was still little better than mediocre. As the ramp descended further, larger pieces of debris clattered in, borne on a wind that slapped at Elver’s face. He screwed up his remaining eye, knowing that to look into that wind was to ruin his cornea and lose what little sight remained to him.

When he’d got his goggles on and blinked the grit from his streaming eye, Curze was already walking down the ramp onto the murderous surface, slow and stately as a ghost attending his own funeral.

‘My lord!’ Elver shouted, but the rubber and plastek of his mask muzzled him, absorbing his words and turning them into a risible honk. ‘My lord!’

Curze walked through the wind without trouble, erect as a statue, his cloak wrapped around him tight as a winding sheet. Elver struggled against the raw strength of the storm as the whole planet seemed to exert itself against him.

His leg stump ached ferociously as he set his crude prosthetic against the deck and leaned hard into the gale.

Dust whirled the shuttle interior. The wind tore up anything not strapped down. Already, the paint was pitting, and drifts of merciless sand, unwelcomely sharp, colonised sheltered corners.

‘My lord!’ he shouted.

Elver experienced an appalling panic that he would not see Konrad Curze again, that he would go out into the storm and be lost. Curze was a monster, his tormentor, but there was a strange bond between them.

At the same moment, the seductive whisper of freedom enticed him. He could shut the door, deny the wind, fly away to the *Sheldroon* and make all speed for whatever system he could find. The nearest was ten years’ sailing, but there were enough supplies aboard to last him. He would be the master of his own vessel, still young. He could raise a crew, sell off the cargo and ply a new route between fresh stars. In a few years he might even be able to afford new augmetics to repair the damage Curze had inflicted.

Curze.

He hesitated.

The primarch was lost to sight behind the wind and its merciless cargo of sand. He had moments to decide.

Freedom, or horror?

For all his defiance, he knew freedom was a lie. The very concept was absurd. He had been a slave, now he was a slave to a different man. In a galaxy of unfree men, a slave must define himself by his master.

He served death itself. What more powerful lord could there be?

‘My lord!’ he shouted, staggering into the storm. ‘Wait! Wait, my lord!’

Deadly cold tore into him with every bit as much force as the wind. He gasped as its claws bit. He staggered forwards; it was too late to return for his coat. Curze was a pillar of night in the grey of Tsagualsa’s permanent twilight. Elver hurried after him, struggling against the weather where the primarch seemed to drift serenely through it.

The slow pursuit continued for an hour. Elver lost feeling in his limbs. Grit got into his augmetic arm, causing it to malfunction. More gathered in the cup of his peg leg, tearing the scars of his stump. Still he pushed himself on.

Gradually the storm spent its fury, dropping by degree, until the wind was gone completely, and Elver was walking through a stilled world where fine particulate floated in the air, and the only noise was the rasp of his breath in his respirator mask.

Curze stayed the same distance ahead, never drawing away, never nearing. He saw now that the primarch waited when he dropped too far behind until Elver gained a little ground, then moved on ahead.

A blackness emerged from the gritty fog. At first, Elver took it to be a mountain, but it was far mightier than that.

The dusty air parted, giving up a huge building. Black stone that remained at a high polish despite the cutting nature of the weather gleamed at him. A small patch of white near the horizon showed the position of the sun. The glow of this pathetic sunset caught on battlements and mighty portals, and windows filled with fine stonework and finer glass. The primarch stopped before a yawning gateway set into a curtain wall a hundred metres high.

Elver doubled his pace, and with great weariness joined his tormentor.

‘My house,’ said Konrad Curze, though the word did no justice to so immense an abode.

By then much closer, and with the air clearing as dust snowed down to rest, Elver saw that the palace was unfinished. Many doors and windows were empty holes. The upper reaches ended in reinforcement spikes awaiting higher storeys. Not only unfinished, he thought, but abandoned. Construction equipment and pallets of materials hid beneath dunes heaped around the wall’s foot, their tarpaulins ripped by years of storms. Coverings for scaffolding hung in limp flags. There was no soul abroad beside the two of them, no life of any kind.

‘Now we wait,’ said Curze.

‘For what?’ asked Elver.

‘For whom,’ Curze said. ‘For my sons.’

Elver retrieved supplies from their shuttle and set up a small camp in the gateway for his lord. They were out of the worst of the dust and winds, but it was still cold, still inhospitable. There must have been many halls within the castle, but when Elver pressed him to go inside, Curze refused to enter.

‘We shall go within later,’ he said determinedly. ‘Now is not the fated moment. We wait here until the time is right.’ He said nothing more, but sat down in the lee of the gate tunnel, where he stayed unmoving, his head bowed, for days. Elver feared he might have expired, but dared not check.

Curze’s sons came in dribs and drabs, announced by roaring in the night. Elver emerged from his sleeping sack amid a shower of displaced sand. The primarch was standing now, a shade darker than the night, framed in the gullet of the gate.

The thundering of gunships echoed around the sky. The storm’s load did

not fall easily, held aloft by electrostatic charge and lingering so long Elver wondered if it were possible ever to see the stars from Tsagualsa's surface. When Elver reached for objects he was rewarded with flashes of electricity and stung flesh. The same effect dragged nets of light behind the ships as they came down, and though the craft themselves were invisible in the dusty air, the blue lightning pursuing them danced bright announcements across the sky.

The ships set down with noisy, avian shrieks some way from the unfinished fortress. Elver went to the gate mouth and awaited his master's offspring.

The first of them emerged as a group five strong. Instrument glow from their helm lenses preceded them, red slants in the dark like the eyes of animals. They came to their father, who towered over them as they towered over Elver. It was so dark their forms were fuzzy, with hard edges highlighted by the bloody glow of their helm lenses, and the actinic flashes of discharge earthing itself through their battleplate. The lightning painted on their armour blinked under this brief illumination, confusing their shape further. Symbols covered other panels – most had death's heads painted over their face-plates, and the skulls of their victims knocked hollowly together on chains hanging from their shoulders. Spending years alone with a primarch did not lessen Elver's awe for these beings. They were more terrible creatures than their gene-father, he could see that. Curze was clearly insane, tortured by conflicting drives and a monstrous sense of injustice. These warriors were not mad. They followed their lord's despicable example freely.

'Soul Hunter,' said Curze.

Their leader knelt in the dust, followed by his fellows.

'Night Haunter,' said the warrior.

'You came,' said Curze. For the only time, Elver saw him smile at his warriors.

'I foresaw your return, my lord.' The Soul Hunter angled his helm upwards. 'We heard your call. We are your loyal sons. We are here.'

'So few of you,' said Curze sadly.

The Soul Hunter's reply was hard. 'We bled. We died. We fought on Terra. You were not there. Why did you forsake us?'

'Get up, Talos,' said Curze tersely, his indulgence soured at the question. 'The rest of you, First Claw of Tenth Company.'

They rose.

'Is there news of Sevatar?' asked Curze. 'I thought he would come first.'

Clicks sounded from the helmets of the group as they conversed privately.

'You do not know?' asked Talos eventually.

'The last I saw of him, he came unasked to my side aboard the *Invincible Reason*,' said Curze. 'I lost him as I fought the Lion.'

'For that reason we thought you might know what became of him,' said Talos. 'We have had no word of him since then.'

Another of them spoke, a cold killer's voice harshened by helm speakers. 'He must be dead, my lord. The Lion took him when he took you. None have heard of his fate since Thramas.'

'We do not know that he is dead, Xarl,' said another.

'It is most likely,' said Talos.

'Horus lost,' said the killer.

Curze gave his sons a pitying look. 'As was ordained,' he said. 'Do you believe it could have been any other way?'

The killer was angry at the reply, and turned his head away.

More of the giants were emerging from the dusty night. Their eyes swarmed, dull as noctilucent insects. Curze asked many times of the one named Sevatar, but no information regarding his fate was forthcoming. All said the same, that he was lost to the Dark Angels.

Curze surveyed his sons. 'You are the first to come. Many more will follow. All of you have fought hard, and are exhausted. I have endured events far beyond your understanding. In that time, I have had my faith tested by daemons and my brothers alike. I return from the dead for but a while.'

'Don't speak so, lord,' said Talos. 'Time may tell a different story.'

'Fate is fixed!' Curze said. 'The path of events cannot be changed. Horus was always going to lose. I am going to die. When I am gone, you will take the truth to the stars, and tear down the edifice of lies built by my father. Until then…' He looked up at the half-finished walls of the palace. 'We shall build a fastness the likes of which has never been seen, within chambers furnished by the nightmares of better men. There I shall write my scripture of despair, the great antidote to the hope which plagues our species.'

Some energy fled him along with the words. He turned from his sons then. Elver unwittingly caught his gaze, and, perhaps due to Elver's hidden gift, a flash of understanding passed between them. Elver drank in knowledge unfiltered, comprehending suddenly and completely that Curze only half-believed what he said.

'You… you fear you are wrong,' whispered Elver. He couldn't help himself. He knew the moment he said it, he was doomed.

Curze's body language became dangerous, prompting a question from one of his men.

'What of him, my lord? What of your slave?'

Curze held Elver's eye. Black, pointed teeth showed between Curze's parted lips.

'I am done with him, Captain Vandred. Dispose of him as you wish.'

Dozens of pairs of slanted ruby eyes shone their malevolence upon Elver.

'My lord!' Elver cried.

An armoured hand reached for him.

ELEVEN

THE CURSE OF FORESIGHT

‘The warriors that came to Tsagualsa were debased. The best of them were deluded, the worst simply murderous fiends,’ said Curze into the cold darkness of the tower room. ‘I do not know when my Legion began its fall from grace, only that by the time I noticed, it was too late.’ He scratched under ribs made prominent by inconstant eating habits. A gobbet of human flesh, dried hard upon his skin, fell away. ‘In my own defence, I will say I do find it exceedingly hard to concentrate upon the present when the future is a constant, unwelcome guest. How was I supposed to pay attention to the evils of Nostramo when my days filled, drip by poisonous drip, with the torments of the future? You failed again, father, in giving me the power of foresight. Justice is an absolute, and thanks to you I knew very early in my life that I would fall far short of its standards, and become a perpetrator of crimes that deserved no other punishment than death.’ He laughed insipidly. ‘Can you imagine? To be made to perform a certain function, and in performing it, discover that you yourself are inimical to that function, seeing every day your death at the command of your own father as punishment?’ His voice rose. ‘Punishment for no more than following the path laid out for you by that father? You made me as an arbitrator of justice. You also made me a monster. Reconciliation of the two is impossible. Is it any wonder at all that I am insane?’ he hissed through sharpened teeth, his words cold with hate. ‘None of this is my fault. All of it is yours. The blood of billions of innocents is on your hands, not mine.’

He became morose, and adopted a wheedling tone. ‘Why did you make me? Why did I have to do it? All the blood, the death, the torture… Those things I can understand, but one act I performed, though righteous, haunts me yet. It should not,’ he said angrily. ‘No, no.’ He shook his head, arguing quietly with himself. ‘It does not. It had to be done. We were right, you and I. It could not have been any different.’ His head twitched, and he rocked upon his haunches.

‘I am speaking, of course, of the burning of Nostramo.’

‘Play it again.’ Soft menace carried Curze’s words across the assembled

captains of the Legion. All Talon and Claw-Masters in the fleet were there, no exceptions permitted.

‘As you command, my lord.’ Captain Shang, equerry to the primarch, could not meet his gene-father’s eyes. None of them could. They watched the footage grimly, many of them ashamed by what they saw.

Many, but not all.

Sevatar, stationed at the right hand of the primarch, watched his brothers’ discomfort with great interest, and those who exhibited no shame with more. The captains crowded the strategium closely. A good proportion of them had come armoured, and the combined hum of their power plants played at irritating levels.

‘Can you not increase the resolution of this imagery?’ asked Malcharion of the Tenth.

The menial communications officer manning the projection equipment shook his head. Shang, who was in charge of the serfs serving the gathering, spoke for him.

‘It was captured by a simple augur lens, deep below decks. There is little light for it to see by, and it is primitive.’ He was tense. Too many eyes were on him. ‘As I have said before.’

‘There’s enough for us to see what is happening,’ said Var Jahan, Lord Regent of the Twenty-Seventh Talon, sharply.

‘Can we be quiet? I am trying to think this through,’ said Cel Harec. As one of the Kyroptera, his words should have carried weight, but many of his fellows smirked and aped his manner, to his fury.

Sevatar marked all these interactions well. There were certainly captains in that room who were complicit in these crimes, and maybe some who were responsible for them. The Legion was changing for the worse. Curze was paying insufficient attention to his war machine.

The angle of the image was high and distorted by the wide angle lens. Menials hurried past, swelling as they approached, then diminishing to near-human shape, before bloating again, seeming to curve around and walk on up a parabolic floor. The corridor was empty of movement for a few moments, until another figure emerged. Retinal shine revealed him, his dark-adapted eyes bobbing towards the camera like will-o’-the-wisps. Only when he was halfway across the field of view did he resolve into a legionary, stripped to the waist, his pale skin shockingly white in the dark. In his hand he wielded a broad, flat-headed skinning knife. He moved off stealthily, tracking the menials into the darkness.

‘Who is it?’ asked Zso Sahaal.

‘We have no identification as yet,’ said Shang, too quickly, exposing his nervousness at the warrior’s actions. He felt responsible, and he was acting as if he were responsible, to the relief of the others. It took the pressure of the

primarch's attention from them. Sevatar ignored him, and continued to watch the crowd.

'But it is imagery from Malithos' ship,' Sahaal lifted a hand in Kuln's direction without looking at him, his eyes instead imploring the primarch to action. 'Surely he must know.'

'There are no bio-augurs of sufficient accuracy installed on those decks to discern who it was,' said Malithos Kuln.

'Then you must recognise the perpetrator!'

'Can you recognise him?' Kuln growled. 'He is a shape in the dark.'

Sevatar observed in silence.

The angle of the footage changed. A new view was brought onto the hololithic display. Though from a two-dimensional image, the machinery allowed everyone present to see it as if looking directly at it. Curze was relentless. This was the fourth time they had viewed the vid, but even so the shock of what happened next could not be lessened by repetition.

The ghostly warrior crept with gathering speed after the two menials. His knives flashed, slipping under clothing and skin, lifting both high into tented peaks from under which ventured trickles then floods of blood. The first menial thrashed and clawed at his back. His companion spun around, saw what attacked them, and ran. The warrior cast the first victim down and ran to catch the second. He was cornered under the gaze of a third augur lens, and there he died slowly.

'There are customs among some Claws of hunting in the lower decks,' said Krieg Acerbus, the savage giant. He shrugged. 'It has always been so. It is the mark of a warrior to hone his skill through stalking live prey.'

'Only to cull the deck gangs who terrorise the menials between shifts. Only to punish the guilty. These were officers,' said Tovac Tor, the lackhand. 'They were valuable.' His bionic hand hitched and clicked as he gestured.

'They are still of standard human stock, and not to be mourned. What does it matter if the cattle fear the herdsman?' hissed Krukesh the Pale. A network of dark veins pulsed under his milky skin with each sibiliant word.

'What do you know of our customs, Terran?' said Tor. 'Their subtleties are beyond you. These men were Nostramans. They are our servants, not our enemy.'

'I know more than you,' said Krukesh.

'You speak challengingly to us, pale one. Very well, you may challenge my axe,' said Acerbus. He hefted his oversized blade, leading some to snigger at him.

'Could we cease this pointless bickering?' snapped Terrormaster Thandamell. His high rank curbed the sniping for a moment.

'This is not an isolated incident. It is happening everywhere,' said Vyridium Salvadi, Curze's Lord of the Fleet. His anger accused the others of being at

fault. He glowered at many he thought particularly responsible. ‘The problem is growing worse.’

‘Not on my ship,’ Kheron Ophion insisted stubbornly.

‘Not on my ship,’ Halasker of Third Talon impersonated him cruelly. ‘Listen to the Coward, so brave, so noble, so sure of the great moral integrity of his warriors. The great leader and fighter. No ganger he. “Not on my ship!”’ he mocked again.

‘It is true! My men are bringers of justice, not thugs,’ said Ophion. ‘You speak of your own Claws, you have no right to comment on mine.’

‘And how can you be sure of every one of them?’ said Krukesh. ‘The Legion is large, they are killers to a soul – whatever their reasons to slay, they will slay. You cannot know every one of your men, not truly.’

‘I will not believe it,’ said Ophion uncomfortably. ‘Not my men.’

‘Denial does not make it true,’ added Tovac Tor thoughtfully.

‘How can we judge anything of what this shows us?’ said Zho Sahaal. ‘These menials may have erred, or committed a crime. This punishment could be just!’

‘It is not punishment,’ said Curze. ‘It is murder. Murder of valuable Legion assets. Murder for murder’s sake, and that I will not allow.’

The primarch leaned into the projection field, sending dancing motes of light across the image. He peered into the uncertain picture. His superior eyes could find no additional information, and he stood erect, turning his head about. The odour of unwashed skin wafted over his captains. Distracted by the problems growing in his Legion, Curze was becoming increasingly dishevelled.

‘Malithos Kuln, you will find this warrior, and you will bring him to me,’ said Curze. ‘I shall pass judgement on him, so that all know no one may kill without my command.’

‘And what of the others, on other ships?’ said Kuln angrily. ‘I am being scapegoated!’

‘Your anger is a clear sign of your guilt,’ said Krukesh. He smiled unpleasantly. ‘That is my impression.’

‘It is the warrior guilty of the crime I can see here that I will pass sentence on,’ Curze said softly. ‘Unless you would prefer if I took the issue higher up the chain of command?’ He stroked the leather case at his waist holding his cartomancy deck, implying the decision was already made, and Kuln’s head was already severed.

Kuln glowered, but Curze’s return glare silenced him, and his mouth shut with a click.

‘It is the fault of the recruits. We have too many dead, too many holes in our ranks to fill with fresh blood. The procedures of selection and blooding are undermined or done away with,’ said Fal Kata.

‘Then reintroduce them,’ said Curze angrily. ‘Be vigilant, all of you. What we see here is a sign of the poison in the veins of our Legion. If poison reaches the heart, or the head,’ he touched his chest gently, ‘the greater organism dies. Redouble patrols below decks. Remove from authority those you do not trust, replace the sergeants of your new Claws with veterans of proven worth. Have them bring the Emperor’s judgement on those who show the merest sign of disobedience. Make them know fear!’

‘But they cannot know fear,’ objected Kata.

‘They shall!’ snarled Curze. ‘All men know fear, even the Legiones Astartes, and you shall make them! I do not care how it is done, only that you do it! I will not allow this to continue. I will not see our Legion fall to… to…’

Curze groaned. Sevatar glanced up to see the primarch’s eyelids flutter, and take an unsteady step back, signs the First Captain knew only too well. Shang looked up in dismay.

Sevatar stepped forwards in front of his genesire. ‘Clear the room!’ he commanded. ‘This audience is over.’

‘The Kyroptera should remain, to see what we can glean from Lord Curze’s vision,’ said Malithos Kuln.

‘You will all leave,’ said Sevatar. Curze’s visions had been worsening, a fact he deemed wise to keep from his treacherous brethren. ‘You too, Shang,’ said Sevatar to the equerry. Shang’s face set hard at the command.

To underline his words, huge shapes stepped from alcoves by the door, warriors of the Atramentar of the First Talon, armoured in bulky Terminator plate. They raised their weapons to cover the crowd. There were but two of them, but they were threat enough to disperse the meeting. The doors opened, and the captains filed out, arguing loudly with one another.

Curze remained standing until the last had departed. He fell into his chair before Sevatar could reach his side, where he lolled heavily, gripping one armrest, unable to raise his head.

‘My lord…’ Sevatar said.

‘Get out, Sev,’ said Curze weakly.

‘I shall fetch the Apothecaries,’ said Sevatar.

‘No,’ said Curze.

‘But my lord…’

Black hair parted enough to reveal one blazing black eye.

‘Get out!’ Curze snarled.

Sevatar took a second to obey, before departing without bowing or saluting. His Atramentar followed him from the room.

Unobserved, Konrad Curze allowed himself to collapse.

He suffered an hour of muscle-locked pain that took forever to end. When he came round, he was alone, light-headed and plagued with an aggressive sadness. The future bubbled with painful clarity beneath the present. Soon, it

would return.

Not for the first time recently, he hid himself in the shadows, and skulked his way to his quarters, unseen, in time for the visions to assail him again.

A world of black sands burned. With murderous hatred, armies of brothers turned upon one another, unleashing the greatest weapons of mankind on their friends and allies.

A series of scenes ran through the primarch's mind, all dark, all horrifying. Ferrus Manus struck down, Perturabo's sullen nature pushed to breaking point. Angron's fury unleashed against his allies. On and on it went, small betrayals, petty rivalries, insignificant hurts, wounded pride, all bent and twisted and thrown upon the fires of hubris where, stoked hotter, and hotter, a conflagration of a scale the galaxy had not witnessed in long aeons tore across the firmament to reduce all the Emperor held dear to ash. Curze howled at the horrors he saw. He raged against the betrayal of all he had fought for. Order and justice were cast down in favour of chaos and lawlessness. Through all the fire and the blood, he saw a shadow dancing, claws red with blood and gore, his face twisted with insane rage and abominable pleasure.

In blood, fire and madness, Konrad Curze saw his own fate.

Curze came round gasping. The whole effort of the crusade struck him as laughable in light of his visions, and so he began to laugh. Fevered thoughts boiled from the depths of his mind. His hands clutched, his fingers ripping up slivers of metal from the deck.

'I will not,' he gasped, his body convulsing with laughter he could not stop even while he shouted in horror. 'I will not become that creature!'

Slowly, painfully, his mind cleared. The spasms of unwanted mirth subsided.

Drained, Curze lifted himself from the ground. The effort to move a mountain would have been less. He looked with dawning disbelief around his chamber. Everything was smashed. The great meeting table was upended and cracked down the middle. The decorations on the pillars of the instrument cloister fringing the room had been ripped free, and the machines it housed smashed beyond repair. On the walls and broken furniture were the deep marks of raking fingers. He smelled blood everywhere. It was then that he looked at his hands and found them slippery red. Some of the blood was his own, the rich, thick smell of primarch vitae spiced with arcane genotech, crusted around his fingertips where he had torn out his nails in his frenzy. But much of it was not. He looked around, his keen eyes piercing the darkest parts of the chamber. A pair of legs poked out from under a fallen drape. The man's torso was on the other side of the room, his guts spread like a skirt around his waist.

A small sound had Curze whipping around, serpent-fast.

A single one of his sons was watching him from the open door. The smell of him was unmistakeable. Armoured, his sons smelled broadly the same. The same oil, the same lapping powder, the same electric buzz of ozone wisping from their cooling vents. But despite their battleplate's hermetic seals, Curze could scent the men beneath, all of them tainted with his gene-seed, but individuals still.

'Shang,' said Curze.

Armoured or not, Shang smelled weak. The strong features of his heavy jaw and hooked nose lied. A physically imposing body harboured an indecisive soul. Shang did not fully grasp the severity of the VIII's mission. Relying too much on sentiment, his devotion to justice wavered. He hid a further flaw greater than even that: more than any of his captains, Shang idolised the primarch.

Curze had chosen Shang for that reason. A man with love in his heart could not betray that which he loved. Curze had chosen Shang to exploit this weakness. It was ironic, therefore, that Curze had found reciprocal affection for Shang in his black soul. Dogged, narrow-minded, utterly loyal, Shang was one of the few Night Lords Curze did not hate.

Shang stood a moment, trapped in a moment of indecision between drawing his weapons and speaking. That was Shang to the core, caution leading him always to the cliff edge of uncertainty, whence misplaced courage urged him to rashly leap. He never did. He would jump only once, when grief had him in its claws, and he would die because of it.

Shang reached up and removed his helmet. His scent hissed into the room more strongly with the escaping air.

'My lord,' he said. He licked dry lips, eyes flicking about the scene of ruin. 'They are getting worse. Your visions.'

Curze nodded his head. His mouth swam with spit that tasted of blood.

'They are, my son,' said Curze. 'Once, they were but images flitting through my mind, presaging events that I must labour over my cards to fully predict. Now they come to me wholly formed, and their violence flows out from me.' Curze hauled himself up to his feet.

'What can I–'

'Save your platitudes. You can do nothing. If I am this way, it is by the Emperor's will. Make sure, should you see the next vision coming upon me, that I am isolated and the area is clear. My scrivener there, he was a man with a dull heart. Not enough fire in him to be guilty. Yet he died as if he were unrighteous. That cannot be.'

'Yes, my lord.'

The primarch leaned wearily against the wall, and looked at the blood drying on his hands.

'I am guilty,' he whispered to himself. 'Fashmanali's death was unjust,' he

said. He shuddered with a toxic mix of shock and shame.

Shang took a heavy step towards him.

‘Are the prophecies, my lord… are they the same?’ Shang asked, his deep, resonant voice trembling.

‘They are. Brothers fighting brothers. Legion against Legion, and the end of the Great Crusade. Horus will rise, and the Imperium will fall.’

‘My lord, we should–’

‘Tell no one of this!’ said Curze sharply. ‘If you do, I shall know. Breaking my trust will be the greatest crime, and the foulest punishment will fall on you.’

‘I shall tell no one,’ said Shang, appalled and outraged Curze could doubt him.

‘I know, I know,’ said Curze. He was exhausted. Sleep beckoned. ‘I have foreseen it. Now, begone.’

Curze brooded for days as the fleet pushed its way towards Cheraut, and his rendezvous there with the fleets of his brothers Fulgrim and Rogal Dorn. The matter of his visions weighed on him day and night. Although the detail varied, the story was the same.

Horus was going to betray the Emperor.

Such thoughts filled Curze with self-loathing. Despite a lifetime of pessimism, even he could not credit such a thing as the most loyal and glorious of the Emperor’s sons turning upon his father. It was far easier to envisage himself turning traitor. Did he not have more reason than any of them? He was there, in the visions, slaying the sons of his brothers with unbounded joy. The images lingered in his mind, intruding upon his thoughts, winding about themselves, prompted to burst into vividness by the most mundane of actions. He avoided conversation, for he would find himself tormented by the intrusion, and would lose his thread of thought, sometimes standing there gape-mouthed while he relived atrocities yet to come.

He began to consider if it would transpire that the Emperor Himself was guilty of some crime, thus vindicating the actions of the future Curze that haunted his every waking moment. Yet this was also inconceivable. His plan was an exercise in perfection. The Emperor knew all. A further line of thought sprang from this poisoned reasoning, that the Emperor was aware what would happen, had created the situation, and even now awaited it. He fought it hard, but Curze could not dismiss his suspicion that the coming war was to His plan.

The first time that thought crossed Curze’s mind, he had howled and screamed so mightily the Atramentar had lumbered into his room, weapons ready, before he chased them away and ordered them never to come back.

He sought some other obsession by turning to his default passion, that of guilt. The Emperor’s crimes were supposed, unproven. He needed perfidy he

could judge and condemn. Cruel fate had provided him with exactly such a subject in Nostramo.

As his visions blackened, became more troubling and afflicted him more often, a second stream of venom poisoned his world. The recruits coming from Nostramo were of woeful quality. They were strong of body, but corrupt of mind. Slowly at first, then with increasing brazenness, the warriors sent him were of the very worst kind of men. He had neglected Nostramo as the Emperor's gift to him throttled his sanity. No more.

Ledgers and data-slates were piled around his chamber upon the iron table. The mortal Ekra Trez worked quietly in the corner of the room. When the darkness came upon Curze, Trez's psychic talent blunted the horror. At other times he aided his master, autoquill scratching on an accompanying screen as he compiled the data Curze himself had processed. The information was there to see, all aspects of each recruit meticulously recorded: genotype, origin, records of crime, set out in plain language. The men destroying his Legion from within were either confident they would not be discovered, or were so proud of their actions they felt they had nothing to hide. Curze glanced at the spread of worn cards in the middle of the table. Their reading suggested that could be it. They could believe they were doing the right thing.

False rectitude was no shield against justice.

The door to his chamber opened.

'Sevatar,' said Curze, without looking up.

'I am here, as you requested,' said Sevatar. He came to the table, and placed his winged helmet carefully upon the surface among the books.

'Do I request, Sev?' said Curze.

Sevatar studied the papers on the table, annoyed. 'It's only a command if you think I won't come. I am here, willingly, as always.'

'I never have to command you, is that the meaning hiding beneath your words?'

'If you want to see it that way.' He looked his gene-father in the eye. 'Why do we discuss semantics?'

'I am making light,' said Curze.

'The Night Haunter. Making light,' said Sevatar. 'I thought I had seen all there was to see in this galaxy.'

'Times are dark,' said Curze. 'I am tired, and troubled. Events go against us. I thought lightness might help. I am wrong, it seems.'

'There is nothing to fear, my lord. Our compliance rate is well within acceptable parameters.'

'But our methods are not. Terror is the greatest weapon available to a man. Terror harms nothing but pride. Worlds fall bloodlessly to our armies.'

'Thousands die to save millions. Lives are bought with pain,' said Sevatar. 'So I would say nearly bloodlessly.'

‘Now who plays pedant?’ said Curze.

‘I am making light,’ said Sevatar, so stonily it would have been impossible for anyone but Curze to detect his humour.

Curze’s smile evaporated. ‘All that is under threat. The Eighth Legion has become infested by men who revel in the means while losing sight of the end. They take pleasure in pain and scoff at notions of crime and punishment.’

‘I had noticed,’ said Sevatar. ‘The timing of your realisation could have been better, my lord,’ said Sevatar. ‘We carry a cargo of serpents to a meeting with your brothers.’

‘And at a time our methods are under scrutiny like at no other.’ Curze shoved a ledger towards the First Captain, so that it bumped against his helm. Sevatar glanced at script written with a machine’s precision on leaves of hand-made paper.

‘Elements within the Legion have abetted the criminals of the home world. While I frothed and raved in my quarters, they have welcomed these degenerates into our ranks with open arms.’

‘All for power,’ Sevatar said immediately. ‘You would think elevation to a state far beyond the weaknesses of baseline man and participation in the greatest venture the human race has engaged in would be enough power for anyone. But what do I know? The motives of other men mystify me. What I see as idiocy, others embrace. Why do they not see that power craves more power? It is a fool’s hunger that consumes all until it eats the man that suffers it. It would amuse me, if it weren’t so dangerous.’

‘The pursuit of power within the hierarchy of a Legion is to be encouraged. To create power outside of its structure is disloyal.’

‘I agree. I have already set in motion plans to curb the excesses of the worst. All captains suspected of involvement with debasing the standard of recruits are being questioned.’

Curze turned another page.

‘Commendable, but call it off.’

Sevatar’s slightly narrowed eyes were the only sign of puzzlement he permitted himself.

‘Now that is an interesting stance to take. I assume you’ll explain to me why?’

‘The Legion has to be brought back under control. A show of force is required.’ Curze flipped the book closed.

‘Have you considered that you might be wrong?’

‘I never consider anything but that!’ said Curze with dangerous energy. ‘There are rumours that the government of Lord Balthius has fallen. I have Shang investigating. They would have to be actively hiding the change of regime from us, if that were the case. That is a crime in itself. My messages to Nostramo get no reply, or the most pressing questions go unanswered. I have

been forced to turn to the Council of Terra to find the truth.'

'That might explain the fall in quality of our recruits.'

'It might, but the rot set in years ago.' Curze stabbed a book with a long fingernail. 'Here, twelve years back, are consignments of youths taken from gaol. Their psychometric test results have been tampered with. This is greed, and not from a single source, but over and over again. Our recruit masters there must be involved.'

'Mortals are fallible.'

'I have said there are elements at large in the fleet who also hasten our Legion's degeneration, and they are not mortal,' Curze snarled. 'If Balthius is overthrown, it is the culmination of corruption, not the cause.' He pushed back his hair over his ears. 'We are repeatedly poisoned. What do you do with a serpent that bites you?'

'You kill it so it may not bite you again, my lord.'

'Exactly.'

'The Legion is bitten. The serpent is outside our ranks.' Sevatar hid his surprise badly. 'You will not punish the Legion, but Nostramo?'

'I intend to do more than punish it,' said Curze. 'I will make of it an example the likes of which none can ignore.'

'Exterminatus,' said Sevatar.

Curze grinned. 'That's why I like you so much, Sev. I don't have to explain anything to you. You grasp everything swiftly, and moreover, you understand why I do what must be done.'

'If you say it must be done, then it must be done. How?'

'We can rely only on our own fleet,' said Curze. 'The others – my brothers – they would not understand. They would try to stop me. Months will be wasted while arguments are made and evidence presented. If I manage to convince them, they would attempt to force a new compliance. During this time, those responsible will flee Nostramo. By following the law, justice will not be done. If Nostramo must be destroyed it should be done quickly.'

Sevatar nodded. 'A fraction of the fleet could achieve the destruction of the planet, if targeted correctly. But there are factions… people, among the Legion and among the Legion's servants, who will baulk at carrying these orders out. There could be dissension among the crews, even upon those ships we can most heavily rely on. There will be violence.'

'A war in the Legion.' An image from his visions intruded into Curze's consciousness, a Space Marine in midnight blue gunning down one in midnight black. 'Not now. It will not occur.'

A lesser warrior might have argued and pointed out further risks. Sevatar only nodded.

'I will make sure of it. My Atramentar will ensure compliance with your command, no matter the cost.'

His stern obedience brought a laugh to Curze's lips.

'Sevatar, Sevatar – never doubtful, always sure of his course of action, unbending, unbroken.' The primarch searched his First Captain's face. 'So loyal, so imperturbable.'

'There is nothing to doubt. The guilty must be punished.'

'I wonder sometimes what you would do if I asked you to follow a course of action you regarded as unjust.'

'Then I would fight you, even though you'd kill me.'

Curze nodded, though in his heart he knew this was not true, and that Sevatar's fate would bring him much pain before he found equilibrium again. Through loyalty, he would follow Curze a long way down a dark path before he found his way back. This he saw in flashes. His ultimate end was hidden to the primarch, but in the figure of his First Captain the true spirit of the Legion was embodied, and through him it would survive.

'I am entrusting this action to you, my son.'

'"My son", is it, today?' said Sevatar. 'You are becoming sentimental.'

'I am not myself,' said Curze, half in jest. He wondered if Sevatar could tell how hollowed out he had become.

'What about Shang? I can see him agreeing to whatever you say here, then falling to pieces when he contemplates the enormity of what you're asking. Don't trust him with this yet.'

'Shang will be told,' Curze disagreed. 'But I will keep him close. I need a man of action, Sevatar, one without qualms or scruples that will sway him from the path of righteousness. The punishment that we must mete out will seem harsh beyond reason. Many of my brothers harbour affection for their home worlds. They speak of the unity of mankind and the common good, but no one is above ties of family and tribe. What I will do will appal some of them. They will look to their own first, all of them, when danger threatens.'

'But not you.'

'Justice knows no favour. It is blind, and merciless. I am its agent. I cannot show favour to a world simply because I grew to manhood there. Justice holds all to be equal. It must be so, or the scales that weigh the deeds of men can never be balanced, and sin will proliferate forever more.'

Sevatar bowed his head. 'I shall begin preparations immediately, my lord.'

Curze went back to his book, turned the finely made pages of the codex carefully. Black letters swam over white as he flicked through, his primarch's mind processing the information instantly.

'We shall see it done after Cheraut. Before then, I have another task to perform. It is time I spoke with my brothers.' Again he looked at the cards. 'What will happen is unclear to me, but perhaps all this horror can be forestalled. Perhaps the rumours are inflated, and Nostramo might be saved,' murmured Curze. 'Maybe Balthius is alive still, and this situation can be

rectified.’

‘Do you believe that?’

The primarch’s manner changed. ‘Not for a moment, Sev.’ Curze’s hair swung over his face as he bowed his head over yet more damning evidence. ‘Nostramo will burn. Fate and justice demand it.’

TWELVE

NOSTRAMO BURNS

Alarms blared the length and breadth of the *Nightfall*.

A machine voice boomed over the shrieking wail.

‘Translation imminent. Prepare. Prepare.’

Their departure from Cheraut was swift, and the passage from there rocky, shaking the ship from stem to stern. Shang expected the exit from the immaterium to the material realm to be worse. He did not have time to stop and brace himself against the ship’s upheaval. It bounced through knotted warp currents, sending serfs staggering. He was no superstitious primitive, but he felt a certain dread that the warp was reacting to what Curze intended to do. Shang steadied himself against the wall with one outstretched hand, in too much of a hurry to slow himself by activating his maglocks. He needed to find the First Captain, fast.

‘Translation in five, four, three…’ the machine voice said.

The warp engines whined and growled like live things. The ship’s prow bounced upwards, as forcefully as if it were a wooden ship daring a gale.

‘…two, one.’

A wave of nausea pulsed through Shang’s mind. The ship seemed to drop a thousand metres. A wet tearing sounded from every quarter, accompanying the desperate lunging of the ship. An outraged scream seemed to shriek right through his soul, knocking him sideways into the wall.

The emergence from the warp was one of the worst Shang had experienced, throwing about serfs, servitors and anything else not bolted down with its violence. Aftershocks rumbled down the length of the vessel. The screams of the injured and shrill machine noises of damaged mechanisms echoed down the corridor.

‘Translation complete.’

Shang pushed himself off a wall stanchion, his armoured fingers leaving imprints in the metal, and forced himself on towards the Armoury Temple’s rear entrance.

The door opened onto an ornate study of carven night. Every stone and metal in the temple was of umbral hue. Blacklight soaked the scene deeper

into shadow, making the faces of the Atramentar preparing for battle shine unnatural colours, and their teeth and eye whites gleam like alien jewels.

‘Sevatar!’ Shang shouted. The chamber was long, divided by ornate pillars into discrete bays where the elite First Company were being bolted into their armour. There were dozens of them, attended by hundreds of serfs. Power tool whine and the ready chimes of diagnostic instruments echoed from the vaulting of the high, blue-black marble ceiling.

‘Sevatar!’ he repeated, shoving his way through the press of menials and cyborgs. The Atramentar, half-clad in their midnight battleplate, stared at him in silent hostility – all except one, who raised his unarmoured right arm and pointed down the hall.

‘Bay fourteen, equerry,’ he said.

‘My thanks, Malek.’ Shang dipped his winged helm in acknowledgement, and pushed on.

Sevatar was halfway through the armouring process. Already, his legs were clad in multiple layered armour plates of plasteel and ceramite. The huge back portion of the armour was in position, and the chestpiece was being manoeuvred towards its mating points by a specially adapted servitor.

‘Terminator plate?’ said Shang. ‘That is not your favoured method of warfare. You are usually more subtle.’

‘I am the master of the Atramentar,’ said Sevatar. ‘Occasionally it suits me to fight with them, in their manner. We wouldn’t want them to think I wasn’t up to it.’ The chest-plate was guided home. Bonding plugs clicked into position, following by a hiss of pressurising feed lines. ‘I assume you haven’t come down here to comment on my choice of garb. What do you want, Shang?’

The equerry turned his head left and right, taking in the frantic level of activity. ‘Lord Curze intends to go through with it.’

‘Do you think it could be otherwise, Shang?’ said Sevatar. ‘In fact, forget it. Here’s another question for you instead – why do you feel the need to say such asinine things?’

‘I don’t have time for your jibes, Jago,’ said Shang.

Sevatar frowned. ‘Don’t call me that.’

‘I’ll call you what I damn well please, First Captain,’ said Shang. ‘I am equerry to the primarch. Look at this. Look at what we are doing. We are about to wage war on our own home world.’

‘The dog can bark, but do you bite, Lord Shang? I say not. This is why Lord Curze favours me for this task. It is down to me to ensure that the punishment of Nostramo occurs.’

‘This isn’t right,’ said Shang. ‘This is the world of our birth. Billions of people. A valuable contributor to the Imperium, wasted. We were created for more than this.’

‘No we weren’t,’ said Sevatar. ‘This is exactly what we were created for. To commit the deeds others shrink from.’

‘This is wrong, you know it. Ask your men to stand down. If I can just have a little more time–’

‘To convince the primarch he is wrong? Konrad Curze is our lord. This is his command. His mind is made up.’

‘Damn Curze. We serve a higher power. We serve the Emperor and mankind! This is madness!’

‘You serve a higher power? Do you now?’ said Sevatar. He held out his arms. Sweating menials wrestled the upper parts of his arm plating into place. Power drivers whirred bolts home. ‘I find you irritating, Shang. In particular, I find it annoying the way you present a confident face to the primarch and that of a worried grandmother to the rest of us. I have seen you, strutting about in front of him. You wear his approval like paper armour, dazzled by its glory, always sure some other will snatch it from you, then scurrying off behind his back. You are not his nurse, Shang. You are equivocal. Certain until uncertainty takes you, which it always does. How do you rest?’

‘Better than you,’ said Shang. ‘I do my duty. I question these orders because of my loyalty, not because of my lack of it.’

‘I’m doing my duty, too. The amusing thing is the way we regard our duties so differently, when they should be the same. That is because you are wrong. History will vindicate me, Shang. You will feature only a little in its pages.’

‘Sevatar, listen to me. We have to stop this.’

Sevatar leaned back a little to allow power lines to be clipped into place. ‘Curze thinks you’re weak, you know that? Actually, that is wrong. He knows you are weak.’ Armoured gauntlets were slipped onto Sevatar’s hands.

‘I serve him loyally. I know he thinks my devotion to him is weakness, but it is my strength.’

‘And yet you are here, in my arming chamber, questioning his orders. Do you think you coming to me and waving your finger in my direction, barking your toothless bark about morality and higher purpose, will work? Why? There are innocent people on Nostramo, but we have gladly slaughtered innocents before, to ensure compliance. As individuals, they may be blameless, but as a society Nostramo is beyond redemption. It must die in the name of justice. The light of its burning will act as every other sacrificial town, planet or system we have ever burned has, and bring the majority into line. It will halt the activities of the criminal few in our Legion. This is a purposeful atrocity. I do it gladly so future atrocities can be avoided.’

‘What has got into you?’ hissed Shang. ‘You sound like a fanatic, Sevatar. This isn’t your way. The Sevatar I know is cynical, cold. He wouldn’t see the sense in any of this.’

‘What do you know about my way?’ said Sevatar. ‘Nothing, because it is

the way of the strong.’

‘Sevatar, I haven’t come to you because you are First Captain,’ said Shang in exasperation. ‘I come to you because you are one of the only other warriors who holds our master in his heart the way I do. The others are jackals, or disillusioned if they once had honour. I am not weak. I’m the only one who is strong enough to see that the primarch is ill and to voice it openly.’ Shang spoke quickly, aware he had limited time to convince Sevatar. ‘He’s beginning to lose his mind. You can’t see it yet, but I can. You saw what he did on Cheraut.’

‘He went to Fulgrim for help, and was insulted.’

But Sevatar was uneasy. He’s seen it too, Shang realised.

‘He nearly killed Rogal Dorn! He butchered warriors from other Legions, and now this mad charge to our home system to mete out justice without first establishing the facts.’

‘You established the facts. War rips through the hives. Balthius is dead.’

‘Then it at least deserves a trial. You’ve seen what he becomes, how violent his visions are. He is changing. He needs our help, not our complicity in his crimes.’

‘Konrad Curze is not mad,’ said Sevatar with deadly, threat-filled certainty. The look in his eyes belied the tone of his voice, however.

‘For the Emperor’s sake, Sevatar, no one is more devoted to the Night Haunter than I!’ Shang gritted his teeth. His frustration growled from his voxmitter. ‘He is not in his right mind. He is deteriorating. You’ve seen the way he keeps himself now, the darkness of his mood. If we allow this madness to continue, we will accelerate this malady. There will be no turning back from this. You have no idea what he sees. None. Stop this now.’

‘I didn’t think I would ever see the day,’ said Sevatar. ‘Shang traducing our noble lord.’

‘Listen to what I am saying.’ Shang looked about with desperate eyes to the other hulking warriors. ‘What do you say, Atramentar? This is your world. If your captain cannot see sense, perhaps you will.’

The Terminators remained unmoving.

‘They think what I tell them to think,’ said Sevatar, amusement playing around his lips. ‘They are the most loyal to the primarch’s vision. That is why they are the Atramentar. A position of honour you have never held yourself, for obvious reasons.’

Sevatar’s serfs finished shutting him into his armour, driving the last bolts home, so that he was fully encased from the neck down. The menials quickly checked their work, then stepped back. With a snap and a building whine, the armour’s reactor came online. Sevatar seemed to physically grow as fibre bundles tightened and pistons pushed out of their sleeves. Other serfs stepped forwards armed with an array of devices, and plugged them in to external

ports to test the armour.

‘You are as insane as he is.’

‘I am not,’ said Sevatar. ‘I know what you are talking of. He is unstable, but he is not mad.’

‘Then why are you doing this?’ hissed Shang.

‘Will you indulge me, Shang?’ said Sevatar, ‘by answering a single question?’

‘If you will give some credence to what I am saying, then yes,’ said Shang.

‘The government of Nostramo has been usurped by criminals,’ said Sevatar. ‘The hive lords pay lip service to unity while openly warring on each other. The streets are filled with screaming victims of violence and rape. Misery is the sole experience open to the vast majority of population. All are complicit in supplying our Legion, this organisation of the Emperor you hold in such high regard, with the worst examples of humanity they can find.’

‘How?’ said Shang. ‘How can the common people be held guilty of that?’

‘Oh, but they are. Mothers are glad their sons remain at home. Friends are relieved their gang mates are not taken. Those not worthy are pleased that those who should be recruited are not. This is a crime of the whole society. Do you not agree?’

Shang said nothing.

A clamp bearing the heavy Terminator helm wheeled along a track set into the arming alcove roof, coming to a rest over Sevatar’s head.

‘So tell me, in your honest opinion, is Nostramo – as a society – guilty, or innocent?’

Shang shut his eyes and shook his head. ‘Do not do this, Sevatar. There is no way back from here.’

‘Answer me, please, Shang, honestly.’ Sevatar’s voice remained cool, but lost its edge.

Shang raised his head and flicked back his cloak over his arm. Red helm lenses locked with black eyes.

‘It is guilty.’

‘The guilty deserve to be punished,’ said Sevatar. ‘That is the one immutable fact of civilisation, for without punishment, there can be no civilisation. This is what our gene-father teaches us. We kill the few that the many can live, whether they be strangers, or our own families.’

The serfs stepped back. One depressed a button on a control box and the helm descended, swallowing Sevatar’s head.

‘Ave dominus nox,’ he growled through his suit voxmitters. ‘Gernoth, Karash, remain with Lord Commander Shang until the verdict has been passed upon the home world.’ He lifted his arms, testing the armour himself. ‘Nothing can escape justice, Shang. Nothing should.’

The two Atramentar Sevatar had summoned clumped forward to stand

either side of Shang.

‘I spare you the pain of taking part in this, seeing as you are so clearly undecided as to what is just and what is not.’

Shang stood proudly between his towering escorts. ‘I will stand on the bridge with our lord as honour demands, and watch the sentence carried out.’

‘That’s right, Shang,’ rumbled Sevatar. ‘You watch. That’s what you do best. I’ll pull the trigger, because I can. You can’t.’

‘All ships, open fire.’

Konrad Curze’s hissed command echoed around the cathedral spaces of the Master of Darkness’ command bridge. The bruised, tumorous orb of Nostramo turned beneath the fleet. Its sole moon crept around the dark edge of the world. In the tacticarium displayed upon the hololith a single area glowed with hundreds of targeting points, data screed rolling down it in multiple floating windows.

Shipmistress Tolitha Genesh shifted in her command throne, uneasy at the presence of the Night Lord sent to watch over her. She allowed herself only the briefest, uneasy pause, before speaking firmly.

‘Gunnery command, plot immediate target acquisition upon the primarch’s mark, and open fire.’

Several junior officers immediately moved to act upon the captain’s order, but slowed when they noticed many others were not. A dozen of them stood at their stations, staring at the captain. Foremost among them was the Master of Ordnance.

‘Countermand those orders,’ he said. The few officers still working paused. Servitors burbled indignantly at the interruption to their programming.

‘Did you not hear? That was a direct command from the primarch himself,’ said Genesh.

‘I will not do this,’ said the Master of Ordnance.

Murmurs rose from the pits of gunnery command.

‘Nor I,’ said another officer, emboldened by the Master of Ordnance’s defiance.

Activity all over the bridge came to a standstill.

‘This is our home world,’ one said.

‘We will not!’

Nostramo was already under fire. Its defensive orbitals went first, blasted to pieces before their surprised crews could respond. Munitions hurtling towards the planet were swallowed by the clouds. Lance strikes stirred up storms. Return fire from defence laser batteries on the surface was short lived, being ruthlessly suppressed.

‘Look at it!’ shouted the Master of Ordnance. ‘This is our home!’

‘Lord Ilthen?’ Genesh asked the silent Night Lord behind the Master of Ordnance, but the figure remained unmoving, hypnotised by the destruction

unfolding on the planet below.

‘We’ll all be killed for this, can’t you see?’ Genesh said. She stood, hand on her service laspistol. Guns levelled at her from behind. Her own armsmen turned against her, and still Ilthen did not move.

Genesh was in the middle of formulating a response when an electric buzz blared from the bridge voxnet. A burst of intense cold preceded a thunderclap of displaced air.

Three Atramentar stood in a haze of dispersing corposant, weapons raised.

‘Why is this ship not firing?’ said the lead. Genesh recognised him immediately.

‘Lord Captain Sevatar,’ she said in relief. ‘Thank Terra you are here. I have a mutiny on my hands.’

‘Unfortunately for you,’ said Sevatar. A single bolt from his gun blasted Genesh apart. ‘You are relieved of command. Does anyone else have anything stupid to say that warrants an answer from my boltgun?’ He and his warriors panned their weapons across the crew. ‘You,’ Sevatar demanded of Ilthen. ‘Why did you not prevent this?’

Ilthen’s ruby eye lenses danced with the reflected light of hundreds of detonations blooming across the cloudy orb of Nostramo.

He stared back at Sevatar for a long time.

‘Because it is wrong,’ said Ilthen, going for his gun.

Sevatar opened fire. His first three mass-reactives hammered into Ilthen’s chest-plate, detonating without penetration. Ilthen’s aim was thrown wide, spraying out half a magazine of shots into the bridge. Sevatar’s fourth bolt punched clean through the centre of his chest, obliterating both his hearts and killing him instantly.

Silence fell for a fraction of a second. Sevatar saw the armsmen’s intentions to fire before they knew they were going to do it themselves.

‘That is a regrettable move,’ he said.

Gunfire erupted again. No shotgun could penetrate his armour, and the racket was over as quickly as it had begun.

The wound glared angry bright in Nostramo’s surface. The clouds, for centuries a uniform black, raged with inner fire that made them squirm. Sevatar watched Nostramo’s punishment from the deck of the *Shadowed Blade*, the third vessel he and his bodyguards had brought to heel. A significant minority of Curze’s fifty ships had been resistant to the primarch’s orders. Dozens of legionaries had died putting down the mutiny, thousands of mortals. Damage to the command decks of a number of ships was significant.

Nevertheless, the orders had been carried out. No one dared defy the Night Haunter now.

Shells streaming long trails of fire plunged towards the planet, each one a sparking flash that sent lightning-edged shockwaves across the atmosphere.

Nostramo Quintus was ablaze from root to tip, as were most of the other cities on the fleet's side of the world, but it was Quintus, the primarch's home, close to the fault Curze had made as he crashed down into Nostramo's long night, that bore the brunt of Curze's displeasure. The hole in the crust had never healed, and it was into that weakness the fleet poured its fury. Beneath the roiling cloudscape, a lake of magma pooled upon the surface, so huge its glow shone through the clouds above it.

Not long now, the First Captain thought, before the planet broke apart and its core would be open to the cold void. Sevatar had seen this before. Planet-death was eerily beautiful.

This was different, of course, or it should have been. He had been born upon that planet, worthless a place that it was. Within its cramped cities he had grown to early manhood. Its streets were the scenes of his first triumphs, his first failures, several near deaths, his crimes and his passions. Beneath that boiling lid of cloud, in the warm, metal-tainted rain, he had lost friends and made enemies. He wondered how the other Nostramans in the Legion felt staring at the pyre of their home. He wondered if they experienced the stirrings of hatred towards their primarch, or felt sorrow at the world's passing. He wondered these things because he felt nothing.

Nostramo had erred, and it had been punished. There was no more to it than that.

THIRTEEN

VINDICATION

‘And so, with Nostramo’s murder, I committed myself to the path of darkness,’ said Curze in satisfaction. ‘My monstrousness revealed. What could you do but to condemn me to death?’

He pressed his hands into the sharp iron ridges of the floor.

‘My sons. They are no better. Cursed with my wickedness, they saw the fear I spread and the horror I cultivated as the aim, not the means. They came to exult in the power that it brought. They forgot what they were. Even Shang, in the end, grew disillusioned with me. Very few did not. Sevatar understood best of all.’

Curze’s head drooped, still pained at his favoured son’s loss.

‘Talos, my Soul Hunter. He knows too. He is among the last of the faithful.’ He looked up at the ceiling. ‘His devotion to my cause will kill him, here. He will wreak his vengeance on your assassin and then depart. When he returns, he will die upon these very walls.’ He snickered. ‘I could tell him, but I will not. If I did, how would he learn? Forewarning him would be pointless, and would not convey the lesson. Warriors like Talos miss the greater meaning of my teachings.’ He sucked in a long hissing breath. ‘It is abhorrent, what I do. I am abhorrent. But my abhorrence is only a concentration of the sins of all men, magnified in me ten thousandfold. You intended us to be exemplars of humanity. You succeeded all too well.

‘They were with me at Nostramo – Talos, Sevatar, Krukesh, Tor, so many others. They unquestioningly followed my orders, and obliterated their own people.’ Curze crawled around the throne on all fours, peering up at the vile sculpture. ‘Not one of them questioned if I did the right thing. Not one of them challenged my decision. We were a Legion. I was their lord. I demanded justice for the world’s undeniable crimes. And these were my better sons! Justice was ever close to their lips. Upon a thousand other battlefields they had committed the unspeakable to further your Imperium. What is one more world, one more population of billions? What did it matter that it was the world of their mothers and fathers?’

He giggled. The sound caught in his throat, and rattled out in an inhuman

clicking like the call of a carrion bird.

‘Sevatar once asked me why I hated my sons so. He was right, you know, I loathe them all, faithless and faithful. I despise what they are, these killers who act without compunction.’ His face screwed up tightly. ‘But I hate them most of all because they missed the point! They could not see that they were complicit in a great crime. Had they any insight of my teachings, they would have turned their gaze inward, and condemned themselves accordingly. Execution would have followed. If only it could have been!’ he said, holding up a clawed hand to the ceiling. ‘Their eyes open to their own faults, they would have murdered each other as is only right. Only right.’ He shuffled back a few paces. ‘But they did not, and so I leave them to your crippled empire, so the lesson may be taught again, and again, and again.’

He smiled ferally at the corpse statue. Disappointed that there came no response to his goading, he rose slowly to his full, cadaverous height, and walked towards the throne, until he was right against it, his hands gripping the slimy wrists of the thing he had made.

‘Why should I not teach this lesson? You made me as your judge. It is my purpose. I am the weigher of souls. Do you wish to know, father, how I judge you?’

He leaned so close to the effigy that his nose brushed the slippery meat of it.

‘Guilty,’ he whispered.

He went to the lectern and took up his book, whereupon he began to speak briskly.

‘I have made my peace with all this blood and agony. None of it was my fault,’ he said. ‘As one cannot regret the diktats of fate, for one has no influence over it, then one cannot bear guilt. I torment myself no longer over my nature, for that too was beyond my control. However, there is one regret I harbour.’

He bit his lip, hesitant to reveal his last secret. ‘If there is one thing I could change, then I would in an instant.’ He looked away from the silent statue, finding it easier to confess when not regarded by its bloody eye sockets. ‘When you came to me, and stood in all your glory, burning out the sight of my people so carelessly, I should have refused you. I should never have taken the name you forced upon me. For there is one lesson I have learned from all the horror of your reign, father, one small insight into myself, and that is this.

‘Night Haunter was just. He was a monster, that is true, but such is human nature. All we can hope for is better monsters to save us from the worst. His actions were bloody, but as a result his world was at peace with itself for the first time in millennia. It was only after I left Nostramo, and took up your burden, that my doom was sealed.’

He smiled. If there had been anyone to see it, their heart would have

shattered to see the pain that it expressed.

‘Father, father, father,’ he said. A single tear ran down his cheek. By its progress, a little of his lost majesty was restored. The patina of corruption was rinsed away by grief. Through the grime and caked-on blood, pure white skin, forged by artful gene craft, shone in the tear’s track. ‘Had I my time again, and freedom from fate’s chains to act, I would never have become Konrad Curze. Konrad Curze was a betrayer. An unbeliever. A lunatic, but worst of all, father, Konrad Curze was weak. Night Haunter was strong.’ He gripped his book tightly. ‘And in this benighted hell you have wrought, weakness is the greatest crime of all.’

Unburdened of this last confession, Curze shut his eyes, and exposed his black teeth in a radiant smile. He looked heavenwards, as a prisoner released from incarceration might turn his face up to the sun.

His catharsis didn’t last. No amount of self-loathing was enough for Curze. The more he spoke of his failings, the more he fuelled his need for absolution. Talking wore the grooves of obsession ever deeper. Words could never erase his sins. Not his, not those of his sons, and not those of his father.

A sense of pressure building before a storm pressed the air in the room to an uncomfortable thickness. From out of this rolled a thunder of words that Curze had yearned for, yet in the last sane pockets of his mind had never expected.

+You are not weak, my son.+

The voice drove Curze to his knees with its power. His head rang with sudden, white pain. A roaring hurricane of might blasted from the figure, now surrounded with actinic light, tossing the remains of his last victims around, and burning out the wall, exposing Curze to the light of the hateful stars.

‘Father?’ he said. His voice was fractured, small, a child’s voice. Pitiful.

+I am beyond your accusations. Beyond speech. Beyond anything. Why do you think that I speak? Your madness is finally complete.+

Again the words rang Curze’s skull with the force of a clapper striking a bell. Still he managed to grin and raise his head to stare at the meat-thing’s glory, though he was forced to squint against the blazing light.

‘No, no! You are here. I hear you. You have come to face my judgement, drawn by this offering I have made. You ever were a bloody god.’

+I am no god, nor shall ever be.+

Curze got back up, his feathered cloak whipping in the psychic gale, his book clutched protectively to his chest.

‘You are here. You understand your guilt. You have come to face my judgement.’

+You cannot condemn me. I am punished enough.+

‘There is not enough punishment for what you have done! Not in this life, or in the next,’ shouted Curze.

+How dare you presume to understand what I have done, and what sacrifices I have made, and what I now must suffer?+ The force of the voice battered Curze back. +You will never know the depths of my pain, for which I am grateful.+

Curze opened his eyes to peer sidelong at the figure. ‘Why such hollow words?’

The voice took a moment before it returned, again with thunderous force that made Curze howl.

+No father wishes his sons to suffer, no matter what burdens he is forced to place upon them.+

Curze laughed. ‘An apology? What next, you will forgive me? Sanguinius warned me you might,’ he scoffed.

+There was never anything to forgive. You acted as you were made to, but my plan was interfered with. Your insanity was not your fault, nor was it mine.+

Curze snarled like an animal.

‘Lies! Everything was as you intended!’

+There is nothing you have done wrong. If only you and I could have met one more time, I could have shown you back to the light.+

‘How marvellous!’ Curze fell into a minute of wild, howling laughter. ‘I am the Night Haunter! Light is anathema to me!’

+Light is within you all. You are my sons. You are born of light. None of you are beyond redemption.+

‘Tell that to those who died.’

+Nothing ever dies. Death is a state of transition. You have my forgiveness, Konrad, whether you want it or not.+

‘Never!’

The voice in his head would not relent, but pounded mercilessly on. More masonry fell from the outside wall. The floor collapsed behind him, frittering into its constituent atoms.

+You made but one mistake, my son. From it, all the evil you have perpetrated springs. You chose to believe in immutable fate. Without choice, there is nothing. These gods that taunt us rely upon choice. The functioning of this universe depends upon choice. A single fate is one book in a library of illimitable futures. You read only one. Do you not see that you *chose* this? You *chose* to be fate’s prisoner. Had you believed in your own agency, none of this would have come to pass. You made this happen. You chose to be the way you are, trapped, manipulated. Insane.+

Curze’s smile froze, seeming to become detached from the face that wore it, hovering menacingly about his lips as a thing unique to itself, before it collapsed with all the violence of a dying star, and his mouth became a screaming hole.

‘No! You sent the Assassins to kill me. You want me dead!’

+You determined what fate you trod. Your belief, my son, is nothing but an excuse for your own failings.+

‘No!’

Wailing, Curze threw aside his book and hurled himself into the dreadful light, though it burned his eyes, and beat at the effigy, rending and tearing at it with his broken black nails, peeling long curls of frozen flesh from the stitched carcasses, ripping it to bloody shreds.

The light went out.

Shaking, sobbing, he collapsed to the floor. The last remnants of his sculpture rolled wetly from the throne.

‘I cannot be forgiven,’ he whispered. Tears coursed down his face, dripping from his nose and chin, insufficient in their profusion to dilute the blood spilled upon the floor. ‘After all I have done, where would be the justice in that? I had no choice! I had no choice!’

The pressure dissipated. Curze hunched down to the floor and wrapped his arms around the ruin of his substitute father. Frozen in a half embrace, he waited for a voice that he would never hear again.

Time proceeded towards the inevitable hour. Konrad Curze stirred himself. He lifted his head, as heavy as millstones on his neck, to look up at the idol of flesh. It had not moved, nor had the bloody chamber changed. All was as it had been before. Only his sorrow had altered, for the worse.

Sighing, mustering all the shreds of his ruined sanity, he retrieved his discarded book and stepped over the smeared remains of his slaves to the door. He opened it, and passed through without a backward look.

The door swung closed behind him with soft click. Adhered to the wall was a phosphex device primed to detonate the moment the door was opened again. This last gift would burn the room and all within it, and dissuade his hated sons should they be tempted to delve into his secrets, for many of them were sorcerers now, and for the likes of them the past could easily be scried in such morbid places. There was a version of events he preferred, and he clutched it to his chest: his memoir, *The Dark*, written in blood and sorrow in his own crabbed hand, including the events in the chamber as he had foreseen them. For so valued a tome, he discarded it carelessly, putting it in a high alcove behind a statue to be discovered, or not, as fate decreed. Free of the weight of its revelations, he walked taller, and reassumed some of his lost glory.

The ways of his private halls were empty, cold and silent. Human life was absent, though death was everywhere. Bones and teeth made complex patterns on the floor. Flags of man hide hung leathery against the walls, and dotted about were mouldering corpses, the victims of Curze’s casual violence. The lucky few were whole, murdered quickly; the majority were horrendously mutilated.

Solemnly, Curze passed into his arming chambers, where sombre, tongueless slaves awaited him. Coming among the living again provoked his anger. An urge to slaughter them all gripped his black heart, but he resisted, and went into their midst, where he held out his arms in readiness for their attentions in a studied sham of calm.

They were not fooled, and went to work quickly.

His weapons and armour were copies. Though his artisans' finest work, they were mediocre compared to the originals. The power claws *Mercy* and *Forgiveness*, along with the Nightmare Mantle and his widowmakers, had been taken from him by his brothers. The weapons and armour in the chamber looked identical to his legendary gear, but they were not the same. Curze curled his hands within his gauntlets thoughtfully as his armour was bolted in place. Once he had been clad in plate that had few betters; now he was reduced to forgeries.

'So many metaphors litter my life,' he whispered. He was impatient so close to the end, eager to have it all done with.

His serfs wisely ignored his words but went about their work with the rare focus of men whose lives hang upon the skilfulness of their actions.

The last bolt whirred home. His cloak was replaced around his armoured shoulders. Tattered feathers took on some of the armour's resplendency, shining blue-black as the night. The armour was not what it appeared, but it looked the part.

Curze himself was immune to reflected glory. Within his ceramite shell, he remained as pale and filthy as a corpse stripped of wealth and abandoned in the dirt.

From the arming chamber he passed into more populous areas, where his sons waited for him. The Legion was greatly reduced from the height of its strength. Unaltered human slaves outnumbered his sons many times over, but that night the Night Lords remembered their days of greatness. The serfs were absent from the primarch's path and only legionaries crowded the halls.

His sons loitered in the corridors as he passed. A few called out, the rest observed his wishes and remained silent. None tried to arrest his progress, or convince him to turn back. He saw flashes of their futures, all bleak and full of pain. They were so arrogant, so sure that they trod the righteous path, when they had been nothing but murderers all along. The first seeds of corruption were sown by their births. Their deaths to come were the bitter harvest of ineluctability.

Take, for example, his command that none stop the Assassin coming for him that night. The order would be obeyed. The Night Lords would withdraw to allow the killer access to him. M'Shen would find the hallways empty. A minority did so because they understood his purpose, that the lesson be given in all its awful finality. Many of the rest dared not act against his wishes, for

fear of losing their own lives should they defy their gene-father, either to his blades should they succeed, or to the Assassin in the attempt. A substantial number simply did not care, hating him as much as he hated them.

His second order, that vengeance not be sought, would be disobeyed, but only one from all the thousands would do so for honest reasons – the rest would be motivated by greed for his relics. He saw it all clearly, right then, in his mind's eye. So be it. Fate could not be cheated.

He doubted that, even now. The voice in the chamber only spoke his own fears aloud, he knew that; he knew it wasn't the Emperor, as much as he knew it was. Conflicting thoughts of equal torment, inimical to each other, coexisted painfully in his mind.

I am free.

I am not free.

I am free.

I am not free.

'Stop it!' he hissed to himself, losing for a moment his regal posture and becoming again the hunched beast. His warriors looked silently at him, and what had been a feeling of delicious vindication turned sour.

He rallied himself, and began again his slow progress.

Very well: if fate were not locked in iron, he willingly chose this death. Let this act be his and his alone, when so much of his life had been beyond his control.

The levels around his throne room were deserted, as he had decreed. He opened the doors to the Screaming Gallery himself. The souls within were among the few who behaved consistently, howling out their sweet music of suffering on this night of nights like they did on every other. Hundreds of luckless mortals were imprisoned in its walls, floor and ceiling, their flesh stitched together, kept alive by science blended with unclean magic. Every one of them was conscious. Every one of them in pain. Their eyes rolled madly in stretched faces. Skins of many colours lent the walls a mottled appearance. Lords and peons screamed side by side, contorted into forced intimacy by their broken, tessellated limbs.

All were equal in their suffering.

Curze strode slowly down the hall, enjoying the screaming for the final time. His armoured boots sank into the giving carpet of flesh, breaking noses, bursting eyeballs, and leaving bruised footprints where his tread pressed.

Too soon, too quick, the doors to the throne room were under his fingertips. These too he must open himself. No being with any will or freedom was abroad in that part of his palace. He had forbidden them all, mighty and meek, for he could not trust them.

Before he pushed the doors open, he turned to the Screaming Gallery and addressed his victims.

‘I thank you for your music,’ he said in all sincerity. ‘I thank you for your pain.’

He closed the doors behind him, shutting out the misery in favour of silence.

His throne awaited him. He walked with majestic purpose to his seat, and took it. His personal effects had been laid out as he dictated. From a cushion he raised the *corona nox* and set it upon his head, and took up the other badges of his office, cradling them like the mummified god-kings of Terra’s distant past. In pride of place, at a table by his side, sat the battered deck of cards he had consulted so many times. He meant their presence to be his last comment on fortune’s cruel grip. But the cards dragged at his attention, forcing him to reappraise them as a tool of his delusion.

He made himself stare rigidly at the doors, his posture that of the martyr in waiting. From leering gargoyles and carved representations of the worst torments, tiny lenses watched. These final moments would be recorded, and remembered for ten thousand years, as they must.

Still as the statuary around him, he watched the entrance, the black pools of his eyes blinking rarely. He was already a king entombed. Now he must only wait for death.

His last words were ready in his mind, finally to be released onto his tongue, and thence into the world, and history’s pages. They had been there since the very beginning, waiting for this moment, the culmination of his wicked life foreseen. They would be said. Their time was now.

Fate demanded it.

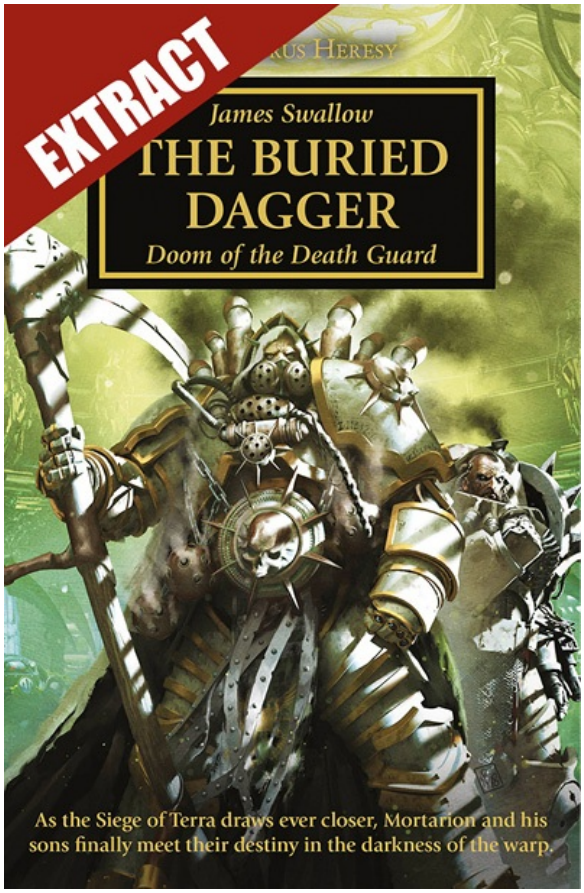
The last moments of his life approached. Curze fancied he heard the grains of time run out.

The door opened, and death stepped within.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Titandeath*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows*, *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*, and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *Dark Imperium: Plague War*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *The Buried Dagger*.


EXTRACT
James Swallow
THE BURIED DAGGER
Doom of the Death Guard
As the Siege of Terra draws ever closer, Mortarion and his sons finally meet their destiny in the darkness of the warp.

The Reaper of Men had grown weary of the screaming.

The cries from a million throats, the ceaseless cacophony of it, now fatigued him. He had long since become jaded with the pleas of those he killed, be they babbling streams of words as the doomed begged for pity, the foolish and furious curses of the fatally enraged or the endless, irritating wail of those who wept brokenly.

There was, at least, a small mercy to be had here on the surface of Ynyx. The monstrously poisonous atmosphere of the manufactory planet meant that every soul who toiled upon the world had no mouth with which to cry out. From the instant of their birth, the machines of the magos biologis sealed shut the apertures upon the faces of the human populace, organo-printing protective membrane masks over lips and nostrils. The workers were implanted with grilles and nutrient intakes, along with countless chem shunts and protective grafts, these enhancements and alterations sufficient to make them immune to the toxic fog that belched continuously from the core of the mineral-rich world. The people of Ynyx could only communicate via vox transmission, their voices muted in all other senses, and so it was that the Reaper of Men could walk in silence among them if he simply tuned them out.

The only sound was the rumble of the planet's breath, forcing its way up through geothermal vents in the black landscape all around him, that and the steady crunch of brittle glass beneath his heavy plasteel boots. Scattered all over the battlefield, more numerous than the ragged remnants of dead bodies from the pre-invasion shelling, were endless numbers of empty cylindrical vials. Drug ampoules by the thousand, discarded by the Ynyxian defenders. Whatever effect they had brought – blissful oblivion, docility or merely resistance against the swirling churn of atmospheric contaminants – it counted for nothing. This world's populace would be dead by nightfall, and it would not matter.

The cold ember of his familiar, obdurate resentment pushed him forward, one heavy and echoing step after the other, over the oily ebon sand towards the great citadel that was his objective. At the edges of his supremely genhanced vision, the Reaper of Men was aware of his praetorians marching in lockstep with him, each at a distance of seven by seven paces, all carrying their weapons across their chests in a blank mirror of his own aspect.

Held at rest against one of his shoulders was a skeletal scythe that was sooty with dried blood and tainted fluids. His other gauntleted hand wandered often to the heavy, drum-like shape of a unique, master-crafted energy gun hanging at his hip. Like the warrior himself, everything about his weapons

was beyond human scale, built for the grasp of giants and demigods. Even his chosen guard, huge as they were, could not match his scale. Only two beings had ever stood taller than the Reaper of Men; the first had died at the hands of the second. *As to the fate of the second…*

In time, that question would be answered. The old, bitter ember stirred anew at the thought, but the giant stifled it before it could grow. Such things were a distraction. His mind was supposed to be here, at the march through Ynyx's polluted dusk, not picking at this deep-rooted, forever unhealed wound. There would be time enough to nurse his lingering hate in the days ahead.

He cast a glance over his shoulder plates. Out past his hooded bodyguards, marching in lines behind them, came the body of his war band. Battle-captains and commanders, the striding forms of Dreadnoughts and Terminators, and rank after rank of legionaries in grimy, slate-coloured armour. He advanced with them at his heels, for they would never dare to march into battle without him at their head, even on as pitiful a killing ground as this one.

His Legion. His Death Guard. His unbroken blades.

They were all that occupied him now. His sons were the only thing he saw clearly, as the haze of the great insurrection led by his brother seemed to coil ever thicker around every deed, every thought in mind of the Reaper of Men. With his warriors, in battle, he came closest to *clarity* – or something like it.

He marched on, into the twilight and towards the great shadow cast by the citadel. The tallest structure for kilometres in every direction, it protruded from a great axial canyon that ringed the upper hemisphere of Ynyx. Thousands of such depthless chasms fractured the planet's surface, vanishing into hellish pits kilometres deep where toxic smoke exhaled from the roiling core. The ashen matter vomited up from below was the source of the world's fortune, laden with rare and precious heavy metallic elements that the manufactora of the Imperium sucked in and reprocessed. The refinery engines – lumbering city-sized arachnids of tarnished brass and grey iron – sat atop the richest of the vents for decades at a time, draining them dry before moving on to fresh pastures.

Few places on Ynyx had any permanence except the great citadel, built on the ancient site of the planet's first colony landing. Formed of sapphire-dark stone dragged up from the abyssal depths, it was both palace and monument. The blocky, brutalist architecture of its design was as stark as a grave marker, its mere presence acting as a statement to the universe beyond. *We have built in this unliveable place and ripped out the riches at its heart*, said the citadel. *We have done this in the name of the Emperor and Terra.*

The Reaper of Men had his orders to cast it down, of course, but Mortarion would do so more because he *wanted* to. Because to do so would be to

destroy one more possession belonging to his absent father, and in the act, find a few grains of satisfaction.

Movement at the edge of his helm's auto-senses brought the primarch of the XIV Legion back to the moment, and he looked in the direction of the alert icon. Curious, he stepped off the line and wandered towards an impact crater blasted into the dense, clumped basalt sand. Behind him, he heard the clatter of a thousand troops halting, but he paid it no mind.

In the crater there were three humans who against all odds were still alive. Ynyxians, and not soldiers but civilians. Their physical alterations meant it was difficult for Mortarion to tell which of the genders they fell into or how old they were. Each wore the hood and eye-mask typical of their people, the feed tubules of their sealed mouths coiled in bunches against spoiled nutri-feed packs they carried around their necks.

They were so very afraid of him. He imagined that he could taste the odour of it in the ashen air. Mortarion had deliberately left his breath filters open wide so that he could drink in the noxious atmosphere of the spoiled world, and now he took in a great gale of it, feeling the subtle burn of the pollutants as they attempted to scar his mighty lungs. Unprotected, the weak bodily tissues of these humans would have melted to slurry before they could fully inhale, but for the Reaper of Men, the lethal air of Ynyx was no distraction.

He watched them, looking through the lenses of his helm, searching their faces for an understanding that would never emerge. It was a fruitless endeavour; these pitiful creatures were no different from the others. No matter how many he found on whatever planets, none of them could see past the fear. That same terror, buoyed up by the same hate simmering away just below it. They would never know him. They could not.

In those desperate, beseeching faces, he saw something familiar – the stirrings of a memory recalled by similarity. The Reaper of Men quickly smothered the moment, irritated by the conceit of it.

Mortarion moved, letting the action happen of its own accord. His free hand drew the heavy energy weapon from its holster, and the device reacted, powering up the moment its gene-lock registered his touch. The Lantern, as the gun had been named, turned towards the figures cowering in the pit. They reacted, silently raising their hands in a gesture of warding. If they were screaming, he did not hear it.

A brief pulse of searing white light erased them from existence, their bodies becoming a faint trace of vapour in the moment of discharge. The Lantern's shrieking power atomised the survivors and turned the surface layer of the crater into a bowl of fused fulgurite. He turned and marched away, leaving the newly formed glass crackling and hissing as it cooled.

What he had done for them was a mercy, a quick death. He knew all the kinds of dying, and to end by the Lantern's flame was a better way than many.

Mortarion had given them a gift.

He forgot the humans as he marched on, the image of them slipping away as his thoughts returned to more martial matters. The primarch allowed his gaze to rise along the line of the darkened, windowless citadel, and the questions that had been nagging at him since the Death Guard arrived on Ynyx returned.

Why did Horus send me here?

Mortarion drew in another deep, tainted breath. There was little of tactical value to the manufactory world and the storehouse moons that orbited it, and less still to the other spheres of rock that circled the watery white light of Ynyx's sun. The Death Guard had found the chem-loaded combat helots who defended the planet to be a perfunctory and unchallenging foe, rolling over their positions with the Legion's signature tactic of inexorable advance. Tearing this planet from the control of the Imperium and denying it to the Emperor was a task that could have been accomplished by a handful of battle cruisers and lesser companies. The vast force and numbers that the Warmaster had bid Mortarion to bring to Ynyx was nothing short of overkill.

It vexed the Reaper of Men to be ignorant of Horus' true reasoning, and in the void where answers ran out, he was wont to fill the gap with suspicion.

Mortarion knew of Horus' dalliances with the beings of the warp, the things that called themselves the Ruinous Powers. These monstrous intelligences craved gifts of death and bloodletting, and while Mortarion did not speak openly of it, he was aware that among his rebellious brothers there were some who were all too eager to appease them. Worlds burned in mass sacrifices, and arcane horrors were committed as if such acts could court the favour of these… *things*.

He wondered, had Horus sent the Death Guard to exterminate the population of Ynyx as part of such a bargain?

Am I simply his tool in this?

Behind his breath mask, Mortarion's pallid lips twisted in a grimace. Once, it would have been nigh-impossible for the primarch to think ill of Horus Lupercal. Now, his corrosive distrust had eaten away at that certainty. And perhaps that was fated. Over countless years and hard-won, bitter experience, the Reaper of Men had learned that in the end, he could only completely trust his own counsel.

The more he dwelt on the possibility, the more it seemed to grow to fit the facts. Mortarion himself had dared to peer into the lore of these warp-beings, the creatures that some named *daemons*.

In the skies above the ruins of glorious Terathalion, he had looked into the face of such a monster for the first time, named it and interrogated it, for what little that had been worth. That had been the turning point, he reflected, the moment when he could no longer dismiss these aberrations out of hand.

The primarch's long-dead foster father – the corrupted and callous being who had named him, the one he thought of when that notion came to mind – had taught him many lessons as he grew to adulthood, not least of which was the value of knowledge as well as endurance.

If you know the truth of something, then you can destroy it, his foster father had said. *And that is all you need to hold true power.*

Mortarion was learning a new truth, page by page, step by step, scroll by scroll. The witchery and sorcerous cankers he hated so much were widespread in this new and changed war, employed openly by Horus, that arrogant braggart Magnus and the rest of them. He detested the psykers and the warp-things with such an inchoate fury that it was impossible for him to find words to encompass the emotion, and he loathed his brother primarchs for lowering themselves to have congress with such creatures.

But Mortarion was a child of blighted Barbarus, and no sons and daughters of that death world lived long enough to walk erect if they were not pragmatists. Hate was all well and good, but it could not outdo obstinate reality. Hate alone did not make walls fall. And so, in the space between his repugnance for things tainted by the immaterium's gelid hand and his need to win the war inside his own soul, Mortarion had grudgingly found a place to accommodate these horrors.

One of them, in particular, that wore the face of an old friend.

Mortarion paused once again as he entered the remains of a rubble-strewn plaza before the citadel, and his thoughts returned to his grand shuttle, moored a few kilometres away in the blasted landing zone where the Legion's invasion force had made planetfall. The vessel, a war-barge named *Greenheart*, was a segment of his flagship that could operate as an autonomous command-and-control nexus if the mission required it. It could be parked in orbit and set to direct bombardments or pacifications, hard-landed in target zones or, as in this day's circumstances, used to light the way towards a decapitation strike.

Greenheart carried cannons more powerful than most ships its size, volkite tech and displacer guns that could batter cities, but Mortarion rarely used them. His thoughts held not on the potential of those devices, but on the power of the weapon chained up in a stasis-null cage on the barge's lower decks.

Even now, the primarch was uncertain that he had made the right call in bringing the caged beast with him, wondering if it would have been more prudent to leave the thing in the dungeons of his flagship, the *Endurance*.

It had *begged*, in the end. Begged him to take it along, begged Mortarion to drop it from the sky and let it eat all life it found on Ynyx, just as it had done so well during the battle for Molech.

'Let me serve you,' it said, in a grotesque parody of the warrior-son

Mortarion had once known. ‘***Let me kill them for you, gene-father.’***

He refused, of course. That would have been too easy. What value would there have been to bring his Legion here, only to let the daemon with the face of Ignatius Grulgor do the deed for them?

Was that part of the plan? A manoeuvre to push Mortarion closer to the path laid out by the Ruinous Powers?

The creature, twice dead and resurrected by his primarch’s own hand, was a weapon unlike any the Death Guard had ever employed, even at the height of their powers in toxin warfare. Wherever it walked, life turned to blackened ruin and disease. *A tempting dagger to wield*, Mortarion told himself. *Far too tempting*.

Perhaps, when this day was done, he might abandon the daemon with Grulgor’s face on this cracked and broken world. Perhaps he might gather the papers and scrolls, every pict-slate and data crystal containing the lore of these warp-things, and pour them into the abyss of Ynyx’s deepest chasm. Be rid of the ideal of them and fight on to Terra as he was meant to.

We could return to the purity of warfare, he told himself. *As the inexorable, unstoppable force that makes the galaxy tremble to hear our approach.*

But even as the possibility crossed his thoughts, Mortarion knew it was already being betrayed. Pragmatism did not flinch from using the most horrific of tools, even if the abhorrence of such works was great. The ends justified the means, and there would eventually come a day when such tools were no longer needed.

Then, they would not merely be *discarded*. They would be expunged from existence.

‘My lord?’ The voice did not come over the vox-network, but was instead carried by the thick, foetid air.

The Reaper of Men turned and with a nod from his tarnished helm, his Deathshroud praetorians parted to allow a lone figure in battleplate to approach him.

The primarch’s equerry inclined his head as a wary salute and paused, eyeing the citadel tower.

‘Speak,’ rasped Mortarion.

‘The enemy appear in no rush to meet us.’ Caipha Morarg gestured towards the great obelisk. ‘Auspex readings show no visible entrances around the lower level of the citadel, and no signs of enemy activity. I would ask, lord, how you would have us proceed.’

‘You are mistaken,’ he told the legionary. ‘They are here. They are watching us.’ As the hoarse words left his mouth, Mortarion took a step further into the empty plaza, and deliberately triggered the ambush he knew was waiting for them.

All around, the fractured flagstones and the clogged black sand ranging

beyond them trembled and shook underfoot. Clawed fingers sheathed in polycarbonate burst forth like the shoots of obscene plants seeking sunlight, and human bodies shelled by carapace armour and deep-pressure mining rigs erupted from where they had been buried. The last battalions of Ynyx's defenders had willingly allowed themselves to be interred beneath the metallic sands so that they might spring this trap upon the Death Guard.

What foolish ideal do they cling to? Mortarion gave a grave shake of the head. *Did they actually believe I would not intuit their plans? Do they think they have a chance?*

He had no need to give the order to fire. His legionaries were already killing, the rancid air vibrating with the smacking concussion of bolter fire. At his side, Morarg used his pistol to behead a human in a mining exo-frame, blasting flesh and skull into crimson slurry through the heavy rad-plates of the machine the attacker wore like an oversuit. Spinning drills and whirling cutters buzzed and clattered as the mechanism stumbled on a few more steps, sporadic neural impulses from the dead man within still pushing it forward.

Mortarion gave it a desultory backhand blow with the flat of *Silence*'s blade, his towering scythe flashing briefly in the bleak daylight. The exo-frame cannoned away under the force of the impact, ricocheting off the high outer wall of the citadel. It sank to the flagstones in a sizzling heap, leaving inky marks on the rock.

He ignored the storm of bolter fire and clashing metal at his back and marched on, meeting nothing he considered to be resistance as he crossed the last few metres to the wall. Surrounding him, his Deathshroud wove shapes in the air as their blades cleaved any of the Ynyxian troopers who dared to stray into range. Emerald-hued lances of fire rippled from flame projectors mounted on their gauntlets, as powerful chem-munitions discharged into the mass of the enemy ambushers and melted them where they stood.

Morarg trailed at the primarch's heels, his helmet bobbing as he looked to and fro. They reached the foot of the impregnable citadel, and if there had ever been an entrance to the tower here, it had been sealed away so cleanly that the rock appeared to be carved from a single gigantic piece of obsidian.

'There is no way in…' muttered the equerry.

'Patience, Caipha,' admonished Mortarion, reaching up to detach a handful of globe-like censers from a bandolier that hung across the brass-and-steel expanse of his chest-plate. Each of the orbs was drilled with thousands of holes, and within alchemical philtres and fluids of great potency nestled in permeable sacs.

Mortarion brought the cluster of globes up to the breath mask that covered the lower part of his gaunt, pallid features, and rolled them in his long fingers, stirring the volatiles within. Wisps of thin white smoke issued from the pits in their surfaces, and he inhaled them, savouring the lethal bite of the chemicals.

Then, with a flick of his wrist, the Reaper of Men hurled the orbs at the wall of the citadel and watched them shatter against the stone.

The hyperacidic fluids within spattered across the black rock, instantly softening the surface into something waxy and frangible. Mortarion counted silently to seven and struck the weakened wall with the heavy pommel at the base of *Silence*'s shaft. The stone cracked like glass. He hit it again and again, until the blow had torn open a ragged gash large enough for two Dreadnoughts to walk through abreast.

'Follow,' growled Mortarion, and he advanced once more, his pace as careful and as steady as it had been during the march from the landing zone.

Morarg knew well enough to stay clear of the arc of *Silence*'s wicked reach, remaining near to his primarch but beyond the singing silver streaks of Mortarion's murderous scythe. They plunged through the mass of common troopers crammed into the main atrium of the citadel and the Reaper of Men moved among them with an almost machine-like action, cutting them down in their hundreds with each back-and-forth sweep of the mighty sickle blade.

Morarg busied himself with killing any who survived the kiss of *Silence*'s edge, but he had sparse trade. Such was Mortarion's unflinching aim and dogged advance that barely a handful of souls did not immediately die from contact with him, and those that endured the first blow did not live long. Meanwhile, the equerry and the Deathshroud mopped up whatever forces tried to flank them from the echoing arcades along the sides of the atrium, blasting them apart against the spindly, fluted columns that held up the vaulted roof far above.

Pulses of laser fire spat down in a crimson rain from balconies and glassed-in galleries hundreds of metres overhead, drawing his attention. Morarg fired back, then barked out orders to the Death Guard line legionaries pouring in through the breach their liege lord had made. He blink-clicked target icons to the vision blocks of the squad commanders and they answered by ranging their guns up. A screaming salvo of concentrated firepower obliterated the platforms where the Ynyx las-sniper battalion was concealed, and the bodies of the sharpshooters came raining down around him to crack against the marble floor, along with shattered bricks and shards of crystalflex.

The Lantern's distinctive song keened its banshee wail, and Morarg picked his way through the dead to where Mortarion stood. The Reaper of Men used the energy weapon to burn off the thick hinges of a huge brass hatch set in a raised dais. As the metal turned molten and drooled away, the door slumped and slid back to reveal a descending passage. Searing, fume-laden air gushed out.

'We go down,' said the primarch. 'The day's work ends below.'

Morarg nodded, and turned back to the warriors behind him. 'Secure the building and terminate all remaining targets!' He paused, then turned back to

Mortarion. ‘My lord, do you wish to–?’

But the Reaper of Men had not waited, and was already descending. His seven Deathshroud fell into formation behind and followed. Morarg nodded to himself, then went on.

‘Keep me apprised of any developments,’ he said into the vox-net, knowing that his orders would be relayed to *Greenheart* and from there to the Death Guard fleet in orbit. ‘Lord Mortarion wishes to conclude the battle by his own hand.’

Morarg took a moment to reload the sickle magazine in his bolter and jogged down the wide stairwell in the wake of the primarch’s praetorians. He suspected his presence would not be needed in the fight to come, but he had been in this circumstance before, reduced to standing back and acting as witness to the unchained maelstrom that was Mortarion’s cold wrath. If that was to be his function today, then so be it. He would take pride in the deed.

Caipha Morarg was a Pale Son, a Death Guard born of stock from the Legion’s home world of Barbarus and not, as some were, sired by tribes from Terra. For many among the brotherhood there would always be a schism, a rivalry in place between the ‘original’ warriors of the XIV Legion – the ones who had been known as the Dusk Raiders, who had come to Barbarus when the Emperor arrived there to find His lost son – and the common men whom Mortarion had uplifted from his ragged Death Guard into the Legion’s number, and in whose honour it had been renamed.

The memories of that auspicious day were hazy but they still existed in the equerry’s distant recall. He cut off the recollection, lest he lose his focus in a moment of reverie, and kept his attention on the descent.

Ahead, gunfire and screaming sounded off the curved walls of the wide stairwell as Mortarion and his personal guard dispatched all those who were too slow to flee the reach of their manreapers. Their pace did not slow as they went.

The unspeaking Deathshroud mimicked the primarch in some aspects, not just with the design of their modified Terminator armour and the war-scythes they wielded, but with their shadowed reaper’s hoods, dark cloaks and the heavy plasteel helmets that covered their faces and aped the impassive aspect of Mortarion’s own portcullis mask. The Deathshroud never uttered a word, communicating only through battle-sign or audial break codes on the rare occasions they were required to transmit a message via vox. There were always seven of them at the primarch’s hand, never straying more than seven by seven paces from his side at all times. The repeated number was said to be an auspicious one, an old belief dating back to before the seeding of human colonies on Barbarus, but it had lost its superstitious taint over the years and was now seen as a simple tactical nicety.

Morarg had never given it much thought, at least not until recent times.

Some of the warriors he conversed with in the Davinite Lodges talked about the number with reverence; they spoke of the power of such symbols and how they could affect things in the real world. The equerry found these notions intriguing, but little more. He was, and always had been, a man of uncomplicated paths. The numinous and the uncanny were anathema to him, an ingrained reaction born of a taught hate for the creatures who embodied such ideas. He had lived to kill such things, back on Barbarus, back when he had been just a man. But like the tale of the numbers and their powers, the longer Morarg lived, the more that too seemed like a story he had once been told and not something he had actually experienced.

One of the Deathshroud glanced back towards him, then away. It was difficult to tell them apart at the best of times. Morarg had no idea what faces were concealed behind those sealed masks. The Reaper of Men himself personally chose the legionaries who were granted the shroud and told no other of his selections. When one of Mortarion's praetorians fell in battle, the armour was said to consume the body within. The warrior then picked to replace the lost would himself be declared dead on the field of battle, and entered into the lists as if he had fallen to enemy action – but in reality, he would strip himself of all identity and become Deathshroud, there to carry the honour of standing at Mortarion's side, as close as any Death Guard could ever come to being considered a confidante of their liege lord.

Would I ever be worthy of such a tribute? Morarg entertained the thought briefly, then shook it off. He already carried a high accolade of his own. The primarch had plucked him from his posting in the Breachers and made him his factotum.

His witness, Morarg amended. There had never been any lore keepers or remembrancers in the Death Guard, only those like him – battle-brothers with keen memories and sharp eyes. *If I am to document all that befalls my Legion and my master, then so be it. That is as good a calling as any.*

Ahead, the stairwell widened still further to deposit them in a chamber dominated by two semicircular doors in the far wall. The sheer amount of visible opulence, from the rich carpets and thick tapestries adorning the support columns to the gilded objects and artworks in every alcove, spoke of this place as the domain of an aggrandised ruler. Morarg's trigger finger twitched. He saw the lavish, self-indulgent affluence of it all and immediately wanted to destroy it.

Pillars of toxin-laced steam and damp, oppressive heat climbed through ventilation grilles in the floor, and a sullen orange illumination channelled up along vast light traps gave everything an infernal glow. Morarg heard a strange echo behind the march of his boots and tensed. The chamber had the feel of an arena, despite all attempts to make it seem otherwise.

The Deathshroud appeared to sense the same portent, and they moved into

a protective formation around Mortarion's flanks. Only the Reaper of Men was unmoved by the air of ready threat in the chamber. He gave *Silence* a shake, flicking off the blood of those it had cut down, and kneaded the haft.

Morarg heard the clacking of great metal claws on the marble then, a scraping and clashing noise like a hundred swords being dragged across the tiles. His auto-senses picked out two hulking forms as they burst through searing walls of steam, man-shaped things that stormed across the floor towards Mortarion, each bearing an orchard of blades and buzzing beam emitters where they should have had arms. A jangling disharmony of bell tones sounded from thousands of rattling injector ampoules jammed into the bare flesh of their torsos and thighs. The hulking forms were some kind of altered human, ogre-like with their chemically forced gigantism. It struck the Death Guard that they were what someone inexpert might have created had they tried to duplicate a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. Twinned freaks powered by cocktails of metatropic drugs, set loose to act as gate guardians for whoever waited in the chamber beyond this one.

The first strike came in a flash of quick moves. Mortarion raised a hand, a simple order to the Deathshroud to stand back and not intervene, and then with a pivot so quick that Morarg barely registered it happening, the Reaper of Men spun *Silence* around to invert the great scythe and kiss the head of the blade across the marble floor. White sparks flew where the scythe touched the ground, and the primarch thundered forward to meet the leading guardian-creature. He closed the distance in the blink of an eye, and *Silence* rose in a spinning arc.

Morarg smiled behind his helmet as the curved blade opened the first of the guardians from crotch to throat. Momentum kept the chem-altered mutant stumbling forward as its body opened like an overripe fruit, belching ropes of intestine and organ matter onto the marble in a red gush. *Silence* was still moving, coming around, and the Death Guard heard the air sing as the blade cut again before the guardian could register that it had already been killed. The scythe took the creature's head off at the neck, and it tumbled through the air to land with a wet thud.

The second guardian fired a sheeting wave of energy beams across the chamber, burning blue rods that melted stone where they touched and boiled off the grubby patina of the primarch's battleplate.

Mortarion didn't attempt to dodge the attack. With an arm across his face to protect himself from the beam-fire, he planted *Silence* in the ground, ramming it into the marble with enough force to keep it upright. Then he advanced directly into the assault, snatching at his own energy weapon. The Lantern almost leapt into his grip, and the primarch lit the gun, drawing a black trench down the distance to his attacker as the beam from the giant pistol melted marble and metal before finally reaching the guardian. He carved off a leg and

an arm from the creature before releasing the trigger.

Morarg inhaled the stench of burned, spoiled meat, and his smile grew. It was always an education to watch the Reaper of Men at his art.

Mortarion went to the second guardian – it was still alive, but not for long – holstering the Lantern as he walked. He gathered a great knot of the fleshy wattles around the mutant's throat and hauled it off the ground where it had fallen. With a grunt of sour disdain, the primarch pitched the creature into the sealed doors at the far end of the chamber. The collision was of such force that it shattered the guardian's body and rammed open the doors to reveal the throne room beyond.

'Who pretends to rule here?' growled Mortarion, pitching the question into the ill-lit space ahead of them. 'Present yourself.' He retrieved *Silence* from where he had left it, made another small motion with his hand, and immediately the Deathshroud were moving again, coming up to trail him through the broken doors.

Morarg took a step forward, then hesitated as a data-feed spooled past his eyes, a line of text projected on the inside of his helmet's lenses. It was an alert message, a high-priority code routed to him from an officer on board *Greenheart*. Several ships had been detected approaching Ynyx, angling to make orbit. But no arrivals were expected at this time, and to confuse the matter, the new craft were sporting the Death Guard's aura-identifier pennants.

How is that possible? The whereabouts of all the Legion's ships are known… The equerry stopped himself. *Well, that isn't exactly true. Not* all *our ships.* Morarg didn't dare to consider what the alternative might mean, but he did his duty and called out to his master, relaying the message.

For a moment, Morarg thought that the Reaper of Men had not heard him speak, but then his primarch gave him a sideways look. 'One matter at a time.'

The throne room was a bowl of reinforced crystalflex built into the roof of a cavern, and far below it churned a shimmering lake of fire. Jets of steam spat from the turbulent magma field, and an observer could have picked out hundreds of machine-slave diggers in their protective suits, still working at drills or syphons in their endless labours to gather Ynyx's mineral bounty.

That sight slipped past Mortarion's gaze without register. It was the throne that brought him up short.

Placed in the centre of the room, at the bowl's lowest point, the throne of the governor of Ynyx was a scaled-down representation of a great seat that Mortarion had once glimpsed before, in the days when his father had taken him back to Terra to see His Palace and look upon the works within it.

'Such arrogance,' he breathed, as much to those in the chamber with him as to that faded memory of the Emperor's studied magnificence. Mortarion

peered into the shadows of the chamber, sensing other beings in there with the Death Guard, but nothing that appeared to be a threat. ‘Do not make me ask again. Where is your ruler?’

‘Here.’ The voice was artificial, broadcast from a vocoder module. It emanated from a cylindrical tank floating just above the seat of the ersatz throne. The object was the size of a man, made of faceted crystal framed in gold, inlaid with precious gemstones. It swayed gently on a throbbing suspensor module, held up by contra-gravity technology. ‘I will not surrender to you, rebel,’ it added.

Mortarion stood and watched as the tank drifted away from the throne, becoming better defined by the orange light thrown by the magma fires. Inside the tank was a bubbling potion of thick, clear oil. At its centre there was a clump of whorled grey matter adorned with delicate circuitry and feeder implants. Wires came at it from every angle, connecting the blob of organic material to the systems of the floating container.

‘I am Magister Greaterex Nalthusian the Forty-Fifth,’ it went on, in stentorian tones. ‘I own this system by order of the Emperor of Mankind–’

‘You are a few kilos of stale meat in a jar,’ Mortarion interrupted, a faint note of disgust entering his voice. ‘And your existence… such as it is… is forfeit.’ He rocked off his heels and strode forward. His irritation at this useless, waste of time of a mission bubbled to the surface, and the Reaper of Men reached out a hand. He would crush this thing and be done–

–Something there?

A wall of hurricane-hard force struck him from out of the darkness. Mortarion was lifted off his feet and blasted, along with the Deathshroud and his equerry, into the crystalflex panels of the throne room.

Mortarion reacted, using the crook of *Silence*’s blade to snag a support pillar, arresting his motion. Morarg and the seven Deathshroud were scattered about the chamber. Two of the praetorians took the brunt of the phantom blow and were blasted clear through the crystalflex, both of them spinning silently away to vanish into the magma lake below.

He scrambled back to his feet, and tasted a greasy, acidic tang in the air. *Witchery*. Mortarion knew that hated odour only too well.

A piece of the shadows behind the throne detached and a skein of darkness fell away, revealing a hollow-eyed youth whose face was half hidden behind a mess of long white hair. He grinned behind his bio-mask, unafraid of the legionaries or the primarch.

Somehow, the psyker had concealed himself from all of them, but now he was revealed, Mortarion sensed the raw power crackling around his form. It was a pressure in his head, the feeling of a storm about to break. The Reaper of Men had faced this kind of kinetipath many times before, in the Overlord Wars on Barbarus and later in the battles of the Great Crusade.

He knew enough to be wary. Physically, the psyker was a skinny wretch, weak enough that Mortarion would have been able to break him in two without an iota of effort. But psionically, the youth was as dangerous as a melta bomb, a raw elemental power barely contained.

The witchkin called upon that vitality, conjuring a torrent of force that gathered up loose fragments of metal and crystalflex, throwing them at the Death Guard in a storm of shrapnel.

Mortarion grimaced and set himself in slow progress, one foot in front of the other, pushing against the barrage flooding from the youth's outstretched hands. Frost formed around the psyker as he desperately drew in energy to oppose the primarch's steps, growing more frantic by the moment as the Reaper of Men drew closer. The ripping, tearing wind burned at Mortarion's armour.

He ignored everything else. They were in the teeth of the psychokinetic hurricane, witch and witch-killer, psyker and posthuman, enemy and enemy.

I have killed a hundred thousand of you. Mortarion let the declaration shine at the forefront of his thoughts. If the youth could read his mind, then he would hear this. *You will perish at the hands of the Death Guard.* He leaned forward, step after punishing step, almost close enough to strike. *The hate I have for you is greater than any other.*

'That is not so.'

The ghostly reply was almost lost in the wind, and Mortarion hesitated for an instant, uncertain if he had truly heard it or if it was a trick of the mind. Then the moment broke as an emerald flash illuminated the throne room from the far side of the chamber.

When the light faded, shapes in heavy Cataphractii battleplate were suddenly there, moving lightning-fast, and the psyker was distracted. The ethereal wind faltered, and it was enough for the closest warrior to sweep in and take the kill that was the primarch's due.

A manreaper blade – a sibling weapon to those held by his Deathshroud – cut the psyker in half with a diagonal downward stroke. Bloody segments tumbled to the floor, the brief enclosed storm dying as suddenly as its creator.

Mortarion glowered at the new arrivals, feeling the still-fading crackle of a teleport effect in the close, dense air of the chamber. He instinctively knew whose face he would see before the lead figure stepped into the light. 'Calas.'

Typhon, First Captain of the Death Guard, saluted with his bloody scythe and bowed as well as he could in his heavy armour. 'My Lord Mortarion. Well met.'

Mortarion refused to answer the ritual hail. 'Those are your ships up there.' He walked over to the reproduction throne, not waiting for a confirmation. The floating tank and the brain of the planetary governor within it was babbling a stream of panicked words, as Morarg and the Deathshroud set

about executing any retainers in the chamber who were still alive. Without halting to listen to what was being said, Mortarion punched through the tank and crushed the organ inside to paste, before angrily tossing the remains away. ‘You chose this moment to show your face again.’

‘It was opportune,’ Typhon offered, nodding at the dead psyker.

‘The psyker didn’t see you coming.’

‘No.’ The First Captain smiled slightly, and Mortarion saw his teeth had yellowed, his skin drawn, as if he had been recent victim to a powerful malaise. ‘You know I have gifts. Stealth is one of them.’

The primarch scowled at the suggestion behind those words. The witchery he so detested ran strong in Typhon’s blood, a legacy that his First Captain had refused to completely eschew, much to Mortarion’s displeasure. ‘Why return to us now? You broke away from the Legion, took your own fleet to seek… What? Answers?’

‘You have sought me, have you not?’ Typhon took a step closer, deflecting the question with one of his own. ‘And it is time, my lord. It is time for the Death Guard to be united in full once more. The final day is almost upon us, and we must be ready.’

Mortarion’s irritation deepened. He had no patience for those who spoke in vagaries, and would not tolerate it among his commanders. ‘Speak plainly or not at all,’ he demanded. ‘Why did you come back?’

‘I have the answers I want,’ Typhon replied. ‘I would have come back, even without the orders.’

‘What orders?’ The primarch eyed him.

Typhon gave a nod, the smile widening, his voice dropping to a whisper. ‘The Warmaster calls us to the greatest battle, my lord. The invasion of Terra will soon begin.’

Typhon felt the citadel’s end rumble through the black ground beneath his feet, and watched the fortress crumble with a jaundiced eye. The great construct’s sad destruction put him in mind of a dying man, slumping and collapsing in on itself as the earth it stood on gave way.

Geoformer charges left behind by Legion Tactical Support squads fired in concussive sequence, blasting apart the supporting structures that had held up the citadel for thousands of years. The tower sank into a roiling stir of heavy dust, disappearing through the thick mantle to fall into the magmatic underground lake beneath it. The final act was the ejection of a column of dark ash and superheated steam – the last, fading grave marker for the rulers of Ynyx.

A sombre wind brought him the sound of distant thrusters. Looking up, Typhon spotted the metallic darts of Stormbirds racing away before vanishing into the low, foul clouds. Mortarion had dispatched search teams to conduct a final sweep over the planet’s surface, just to be certain all life upon it had

been expunged. But Typhon felt the certainty in his dark and tainted blood. Nothing lived on this world but the forces of the XIV Legion. Every settlement and city was a mouldering heap of corpses, the dead discarded and decaying.

A perfect garden of death from which new things will be born, he told himself. Typhon turned his gauntlet over, absently studying the pattern of the plates across his palm and his fingers. A tiny speck emerged from one of the knuckle joints – a black-silver fly with an oily body – and he watched it take flight and buzz away.

Behind him, heavy boots crunched on the ebon sand, and he turned, half bowing as his primarch approached.

Mortarion gave him a dismissive, irritable gesture. ‘Stop. Do not bow and scrape.’ Unhooded now, his gaunt aspect remained set in its accustomed scowl. ‘I seek truth, not obeisance.’

Typhon was aware of the Deathshroud standing at their full permitted distance of forty-nine paces, away on the rise of the black basalt dunes. Mortarion would have ordered them to stay back, he guessed, so as to keep what was spoken of between the primarch and the First Captain private.

‘Much has changed since we parted ways, brother.’ Typhon dared to be informal with his Legion master, knowing that to do so would summon memories of their shared past. ‘I tell you with all honesty that when the Warmaster declared his insurrection, I was uncertain of the path I should take.’ He saw Mortarion’s eyebrow rise questioningly, and headed off his primarch’s train of thought before he could voice it. ‘I do not speak of holding Terra’s banner. I mean *my* path.’ Typhon beat a fist against his chest-plate, above the site of his primary heart. ‘I broke away because I needed that distance to see clearly.’

At the edges of his vision, Typhon glimpsed the now familiar black-silver flicker of insect wings, and in the deep registers of his hearing he sensed the drone of invisible flies. His primarch remained oblivious to them, but they comforted Typhon, in their own way. He held back a smile. There was so much he wanted to share with Mortarion, so many things he needed to say.

I was right all along. I promised you, and I was right.

But it was too soon. He needed only to study the face of his liege lord to know that the time was not at hand. The moment was close, though, closer than it had ever been before. The embrace would come when due. Nothing could stop that from happening.

Mortarion’s gaze suddenly flicked up, as if he had seen something hidden to all other observers. His eyes narrowed.

Does he sense it? Typhon pulled at the question. *Can he hear it too? The coming change…*

Perhaps he did, even if he could not articulate it. Typhon could taste the

psychic stain in the air around the primarch, the spoor left behind by his deliberate contact with the warp. For all Mortarion's hatred of the immaterium and the forces that swam in its depths, he had willingly exposed himself to such powers. Typhon had talked to chattering messenger-monsters in ghostly unplaces, heard them speak of how the Reaper of Men had defied his own revulsion to satiate his desire for knowledge.

Horus Lupercal's bloody schism had changed so much in its wake, from the great to the small. Typhon wondered if Mortarion would ever have dared to walk in the shallows of the Formless Seas, if his brother had not first broken the unbreakable faith of the Legions in so shattering a manner.

Mortarion was on the cusp, ready to be guided over the edge, even if he was not aware of it. Typhon knew of the primarch's fateful conversation with Lermenta, the mantis-crone the Death Guard had taken on Terathalion, and his wild success binding the daemon-tied essence of that braggart Ignatius Grulgor.

The latter was a challenge that few would have been able to accomplish with such scant experience, and yet Typhon's liege lord had managed it with the barest knowledge of the ways of witchery. Given the mercurial and wicked manners of the Ruinous Powers, Typhon had to wonder if they had eased the path for Grulgor's capture, deliberately pitching the act against Mortarion's hatred of them.

The more he loathes them, the sweeter his assimilation will taste, thought Typhon. But the path to the fall was not flowing as it should have. *He should have used the Eater of Life on this wretched ball of dust. It was the ideal weapon.*

Erebus had told him as much. Speaking through his ruin of a face, the Word Bearers legionary had promised it. Erebus told Typhon that he would return to his Legion and find them willing and ready to take the Cups. To drink deep of the new way.

But Mortarion – stubborn and unyielding in all things – resisted the inevitable, as he always did.

'And now you come back,' the primarch was saying, 'and all is forgiven?'

'I will submit myself to any censure you deem fit,' Typhon replied, inclining his head. 'I only ask that you delay such judgement until we can regroup for the mission ahead.'

'Yes.' Mortarion glanced away again, towards the rest of his forces mustering in the blasted wasteland. 'The mission. Morarg brought me word from the *Endurance* that confirms what you said. The Warmaster wishes us to unite for the final invasion.' He paused, his frown deepening. 'His twisted equerry, Maloghurst, told me that we would be the first to attack the walls of the Imperial Palace. My brother, it seems, was unwilling to give me that command in person.' Typhon sensed irritation in his words. 'Did you speak to

him?’

Typhon shook his head, again seeing Erebus’ torn aspect in his recollection. ‘No, only an emissary.’ The First Captain did not mention what else the Word Bearers legionary had given him – a velvet bag of hololithic diamonds encoded with dense fields of encrypted data. One of the gemstones was in an equipment pouch on his hip, and his hand strayed towards it. The others were already in the process of being secretly distributed throughout the command ships of the Death Guard flotilla. They were, in their own way, utterly priceless.

‘The home world…’ said Mortarion, pausing again to frame his words. ‘Barbarus. You are aware?’

Typhon nodded. ‘It is no more.’ He had been thinking on this moment ever since Erebus had told him of the planet’s destruction, and now it was here, the First Captain did not know what face to wear before his commander. Should he be morose over the loss of that blighted sphere? Furious? Or coldly dismissive? He was unsure which expression would be best suited to mimic Mortarion’s thoughts.

‘The Dark Angels destroyed it to punish us,’ Mortarion went on. ‘I should hate them all the more for this deed but I cannot.’ He shook his head slowly. ‘I have always detested the Sons of Caliban. The chasm of my enmity is as deep as it ever was.’ His tone was level, distant. ‘They will pay along with the others.’

Typhon decided to keep his own counsel with regard to his recent contact with factions of the Lion’s Legion on Zaramund. If he spoke of it now, it would only cloud matters, and the First Captain’s Grave Wardens knew better than to volunteer the information. ‘Barbarus was our cradle, brother,’ offered Typhon. ‘Aye, the Death Guard were born there, but we were always meant to abandon it.’ He let his gaze drop, to appear sorrowful. ‘We passed beyond it long ago. We left behind our errant fathers and eclipsed them.’

The primarch nodded once. ‘This is truth. You have always cut to the core of things, Typhon. But there are many among my sons who do not share your… clarity.’

‘Of course.’ He had no doubt that amid the rank and file, there were Barbarun-born legionaries whose rage was stoked high by the thought of that hell-world cracking beneath a bombardment of planet-killers. There would be the need for revenge against the First Legion, and calls both private and public to find the Dark Angels and punish them. Once, Typhon reflected, he would have been shouting loudest among those voices, but not any more. On Zaramund, he had finally found the perspective that had been beyond him for so long.

The mission before Typhon was far more important than the fate of one toxic cloud-wreathed world and its populace of primitive mud farmers. The

future of the Death Guard, and their role in the galaxy's savage destiny was at stake. The two things were so unlike in significance that they could not even share the same scale.

'I say this,' Typhon went on. 'If it is bloody vengeance that is required, then there is one certain place where we will have it. *Terra*.'

Mortarion gave a grunt of reluctant agreement. 'The Lion's whelps will be there, if they do not hold their honour cheap. We shall trample them upon my father's doorstep. It will be a fitting end for the First.'

Typhon smiled slightly. 'When he has the Golden Throne, we can bid Horus to give us Caliban… and then take our payment from it, over centuries if we see fit.'

'Yes.' The primarch's head bobbed. That was the kind of justice that appealed to Mortarion, the kind that only someone who had been hated and rejected could espouse. Typhon knew this truth because he shared it. Not for the first time, he reflected on how alike the two of them were. *Shared pain, shared hate,* he thought. *In that, we both spring from the same dark well*.

He had to restrain the smile on his lips from growing any wider. It was going to work – it was *all* going to work, and Typhon would be at the centre of it.

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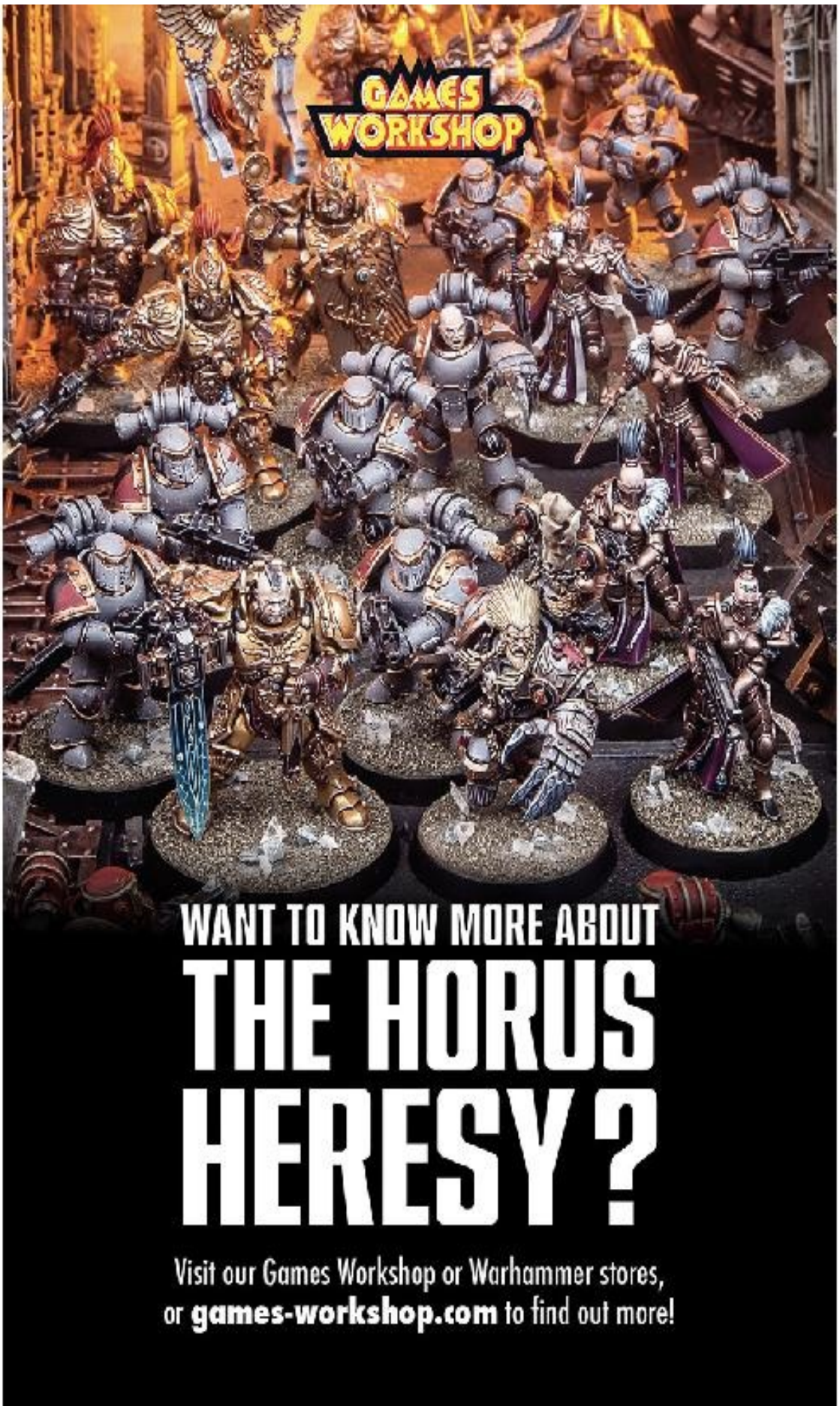
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